

REVISITING THE MURDERESS
REPRESENTATIONS OF VICTORIAN WOMEN'S VIOLENCE IN MID-
NINETEENTH- AND LATE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION

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Abstract

The murderess in the twenty-first century is a figure of particular cultural fascination; she is the subject of innumerable books, websites, documentaries and award-winning movies. With female violence reportedly on the increase, a rethinking of beliefs about women's natural propensity towards violent and aggressive behaviours is inevitable. Using the Victorian period as a central focus, this thesis explores the contradictory ideologies regarding women's violence and also suggests an alternative approach to the relationship between gender and violence in the future. A study of violent women in representation reveals how Victorian attitudes towards violence and femininity persist today. On the one hand, women have traditionally been cast as the naturally non-aggressive victims of violence rather than its perpetrators; on the other hand, the destructive potential of womanhood has been a cause of anxiety since the earliest Western mythology. I suggest that it is a desire to resolve this contradiction that has resulted in the proliferation of violent women in representation over the last one and a half centuries. In particular, an analysis of mid-nineteenth-century popular fiction indicates that the stronger the ideal of the angelic woman was, the greater the anxiety produced by her demonic antithesis. Wilkie Collins's *Armada* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* illustrate both the contradictory Victorian attitudes towards violent women and a need to reconcile the combination of good and bad femininity that the murderess represents. Revisiting the Victorian murderess in the late twentieth century provides a potential means for resolving this contradiction; specifically, it enables the violent woman to engage in a process of self-representation that was not available to her in the nineteenth century. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* suggests that any insight into the murderess begins with listening to the previously silenced voice of the violent woman herself.

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Chapter One

The Victorian Murderess: A Cultural Problem for the Twenty-First Century?

The violence of the ocean waves or of devouring flames is terrible.

Terrible is poverty, but woman is more terrible than all else.

– Euripides

As the most extreme and traumatic act a human being can commit, murder has in equal portions captivated and repelled the Western cultural imagination throughout history. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, our fascination with violence is manifesting itself in a seemingly endless proliferation of representational media. More and more graphic violence is being shown in television programmes and films which has led to concerns about desensitisation.¹ Furthermore, vicarious violence – reading about or watching other people performing acts of violence – has been surpassed by virtual violence – performing violence on fictional victims – in the form of computer, video, online and virtual reality games. Violence in representation, it seems, is indicative of both gritty realism and artistic merit, judging by the Academy Awards lists from the past fifteen years. 1991 saw a clean sweep for *The Silence of the Lambs* which won Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress and, of course, Best Actor for Anthony Hopkins in the role of a pathological cannibal. Violent films are consistently nominated for the Best Picture honour, including *Goodfellas* and *The Godfather III* in 1990, *Pulp Fiction* in 1994, *Fargo* in 1996, *LA Confidential* in 1997, and *Traffic* in 2000.

Even more revealing are the recent back-to-back wins by movies whose main characters are violent women. In 2003, Charlize Theron won Best Actress for *Monster*, the story of real-life prostitute and serial murderess Aileen Wuornos, and the following year Hilary Swank won for her role as a boxer in *Million Dollar Baby*,

which was also awarded Best Picture.² Women's violence, on screen at least, appears to be in fashion. Of course, one must be wary of crediting Oscar with reading the pulse of Western society, but it is an influential entertainment institution; an estimated 41.5 million people watched the seventy-seventh annual awards in March 2005 and Oscar nominations are consistently tantamount to high box-office revenue (Kilday). Add to this the phenomenally successful PC and PlayStation game *Tomb Raider*, originally released in 1996 and later adapted into two movies starring Angelina Jolie (*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, 2001; *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, 2003).³ The story follows Lara Croft, a gun-toting British archaeologist, as she hunts

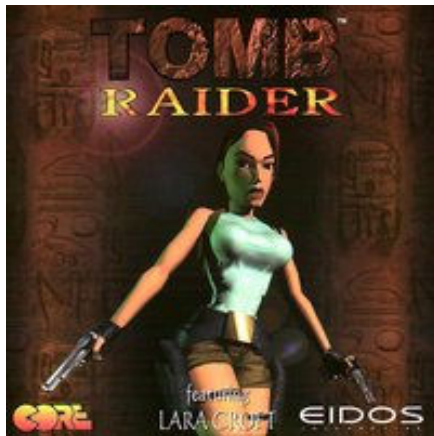


Figure 1. PS *Tomb Raider*

for artefacts from ancient civilisations. Although the game is based around a quest narrative and violence is used only minimally, the imagery designed to promote *Tomb Raider* emphasises a potent mix of brutality and hypersexuality. The cover of the PlayStation version (Figure 1) depicts an exorbitantly disproportioned Croft, a take-no-prisoners look on her face, wielding a semi-automatic in each hand; it is fair to say it is not archaeology that sells this game.

Perhaps it is this decidedly mythological combination of sex and violence that ensures that the violent woman continues to occupy a prime position at the heart of the Western cultural imagination. Violence and sexuality have always been conflated in representations of murderous women, from the seductive dance of Salome to the *femmes fatales* of the fin-de-siecle to the psychotic vixens of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), illustrating the fascination with women as both life-giving and life-taking agents. In raising women to a position of ultimate dominance over men

through the possibility of eliminating life, women's violence centres on the problematics of power and subjectivity. Womanhood in Western culture is tantamount to giving life; conception, gestation, birth and lactation are all made possible by the uniquely female anatomy. In carrying a foetus in utero, sustaining her child by her own sustenance, the woman blurs the boundary between self and other, literally enabling another human being to feed off her. When a woman kills she destabilises her ideological conflation with generation and sustenance; women's power to give life is offset by an equally potent mythology of women's power to eradicate the life they have created.

Running parallel to this cultural fascination is the reality that violence is predominantly a male behaviour; the prolific production of violent women in various media is undoubtedly inconsistent with the reality of women's violence. Women have always been much more likely to fall victim to violent crime than to perpetrate it.⁴ So ingrained is the belief that men are more violent than women (it has been referred to by historian Martin J. Wiener as a "cliché of criminology") that it foregoes explanation, qualification or contextualisation by many scholars who assert it (*Men of Blood* 1). John Archer begins his study of male violence between 1850 and 1950 with what he refers to as an "obvious statement": "Most interpersonal violence was, and is, carried out by men and most of their victims have been or are male" ("Men Behaving Badly" 41). Moreover, the reasons behind gender differences in the performance of violence have become axiomatic. "In the modern world," Wiener states in his book on aggression and Victorian masculinity, "one of the most fundamental obstacles to social order and peace has been the nature of males" (*Men of Blood* 1). Men are violent, it is widely assumed, because men are violent, that is, because it is in their nature to be violent; women, inherently antithetical to men, are by nature non-

aggressive and non-violent. Whatever the truth behind such beliefs, the regularity with which assertions like these are made points to the entrenchment of the split between violent man and non-violent woman in current ideology. Ironically, it is the widespread acceptance of this fundamental difference that makes the violent woman such a potent cultural figure. The supposed rarity of women's violence increases the sensationalism and exoticism of the female killer. As a member of a sex conventionally relegated to the status of object to/on whom events happen, the female murderer usurps the male position of acting subject who initiates happenings upon others. Consequently, her image signifies unnaturalness, pathology and evil to an extent that the male murderer's never can.

1. Murder, Representation and Multiple Subjectivities

And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?

– Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

The convicted murderess is public property. As criminal and prisoner her speaking rights are substantially diminished and she has almost no control over the distribution of her image and identity; some would argue that in a society still controlled by male hegemony this agency is even further reduced because she is a woman. Largely unable to speak for herself, the task of constructing the murderess falls to hegemonic discourses; in the public discursive space of the media, the murderess is presented and re-presented over and over again, resulting in a multiplying of her subjectivity. The recent media fascination with convicted serial killer Aileen Wuornos illustrates the effects of this continual reiteration. In representation, Wuornos fragments into a potentially infinite number of personae: the “real” Wuornos who shot seven men while working as a prostitute in Florida between 1989 and 1991; the Wuornos

represented in the courtroom and in the media during her trial in January 1992, where she was painted by the prosecution as a cold-blooded killer and by the defence as an abused child and rape victim; and the Wuornos of numerous post-trial representations, including the film *Monster* and two documentaries directed by Nick Broomfield, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003). In this second documentary, Wuornos conducted her final interview before her execution, engaging in a rare instance of self-representation, albeit filtered through the filmmakers' lens. Over and above these more "official" representations, the internet has enabled anyone and everyone to construct their own public image of "America's first female serial killer".

Patty Jenkins's 2003 biopic *Monster* attempts to get inside the murderess's consciousness in order to understand her crimes. As a posthumous re-presentation "based on a true story", the film creates a Wuornos who traverses the boundary between fact and fiction, existing in the space between the realms of reality and imagination. The murderess on the screen is not, of course, the real Wuornos but an actress (Theron) performing Wuornos's identity and playing out her narrative; viewers are not really watching Wuornos killing her victims, rather they are watching Theron playing Wuornos simulating the killing of actors playing her victims. Yet, in adopting Wuornos's identity, Theron becomes Wuornos within the confines of the cinematic text; in the space between the opening theme and the closing credits, performing the murderess is analogous to being the murderess. On screen Theron plays the filmic role of Wuornos, but Wuornos is herself playing a cultural role: that of murderess. As Belinda Morrissey recognises in her study of female killers, there are only a certain number of ways the murderess can play her part or a limited range of performatives available to her. Following Judith Butler's concept of the

performative subject in *Bodies That Matter*, Morrissey defines performatives as “narratives of subjectivity translated into codes of behaviour learnt and maintained through reiteration” (7). The first activity of hegemonic discourses “is to construct a subjectivity for the protagonist”, in this case the murderess, “which becomes vitally important in her discursive acceptance or rejection”; on the basis that subjectivity develops through narrative, Morrissey argues that these discourses “enact only a limited number of narratives of subjectivity and disallow others” (3; 7). Performatives are always already in place; a performative is successful if the action that it performs “echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*” (Butler 227; Butler’s emphasis). Theron performs Wuornos performing the murderess and in so doing becomes one of the many echoes or reiterations of the female killer that establish the narratives of subjectivity available to the violent woman.

Monster is a cultural production of the murderess. It is a kind of meta-representation, the title of which comments on the misguided (according to the filmmakers) tendency to cast Wuornos in the performative of evil monster. Although undoubtedly a more psychologically complex production of the murderess than many previous representations, the film ultimately recasts Wuornos as a sympathetic if not entirely innocent victim; the actors perform graphic rape and assault scenes which are foregrounded as the instigation of Wuornos’s killing spree, and her oddly feminine desperation to retain her lover Selby Wall is the reason for its continuation. In representing Wuornos in this way, the film strengthens the cultural construct of the murderess as victim. The contemporary murderess in representation performs an identity that echoes previous performances and contributes to the production of

subsequent ones; through this reiterative process, the murderess is represented and re-presented across time.

It is precisely the performative nature of the murderess's identity that makes it multiple. While there is only one "real" Wuornos there are multiple performatives of Wuornos; in representation she is a prostitute, a lesbian, a ruthless criminal, an exploited victim, a monster, a lover, a loner, a survivor. When the heroine and narrator of Margaret Atwood's 1996 novel *Alias Grace* ingenuously asks her readers how she can possess the multitude of contradictory identity markers attributed to her in legal and media discourses, she unwittingly highlights the position of all violent women in representation. As another fictional depiction of a real-life killer – this time nineteenth-century Canadian Grace Marks – this return to the Victorian murderess draws attention to the instability and multiplicity of "truth" and the role of representation in the production of reality. The fascination with the murderess, as strong during the Victorian period as it is today, resulted in a frenzy of representations of Grace in various media; in the process, her identity becomes fragmented and multiple:

I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder...that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height...that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. (*Alias Grace* 25)

Although not listed here, it is also said of Grace that she is licentious and promiscuous, once more reiterating the conflation between women's violence and sexuality. Representations like these illustrate performative continuity; the subjectivities of monster, victim, madwoman, and whore are applied to the contemporary murderess because they have already been applied to her Victorian counterpart and to her Renaissance, Medieval and Ancient counterparts before that.

Contemporary representations of the murderess echo the age-old fascination with women's paradoxical power to both give and take life, a fixation which is perhaps nowhere more thoroughly concentrated than in Victorian Britain. Victorian society held a magnifying glass over the related issues of gender and violence; the definition and classification of each caused considerable anxiety and the erection of appropriate boundaries in which to contain them was a principal ideological task. While the second-wave feminist, gay and lesbian and queer movements of the late twentieth-century have resulted in a blurring of the boundary between the sexes, mid-nineteenth-century gender ideology was based on an oppositional logic that "underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions..., ranging from a sexual division of labor to a sexual division of economic and political rights" (Poovey 8-9).⁵ The supposed biological incommensurability of men and women manifested itself socially in the doctrine of the separate spheres. Women's proper place was the domestic realm which was increasingly idealised as a haven of peace, security and comfort (Tosh 6). As custodians of the familial haven, women themselves came to embody the virtues of serenity and passivity, assigned with the task of keeping danger and violence out of the home as their roles as wives and mothers were emphasised (Trodd 6). Victorian womanhood became a repository for all those qualities that bestow, protect and enhance life.

Because the idealised good woman, epitomised by Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House", played such an important part in the functioning of society, the bad woman held special fascination for the Victorians. Ironically, the act of disconnecting the concepts of women and violence had the effect of amplifying the dangerous possibility of their potential union. In particular, increased awareness of domestic violence and homicide brought the violent nature of the private sphere into public consciousness (Wiener, *Men of Blood* 3). Along with concerns over male violence against women, cases of women exploiting the privacy of the home and the trust placed in them as its guardians to harm those under their care fostered anxiety about women infiltrating violence into the domestic realm. Numerous sensational and widely publicised trials of domestic murders captured the Victorian imagination at mid century. In the final months of 1839, twenty-four-year-old Frenchwoman Marie Lafarge killed her husband by repeatedly putting arsenic into his food; five years later, Euphemie Lacoste used the same method to poison a controlling and unfaithful spouse forty-six years her senior. Women's victims were not limited to their husbands: in 1857 Scotswoman Madeleine Smith slipped poison into her lover's cocoa in order to be free to marry another man and sixteen-year-old Constance Kent slit the throat of her three-year-old brother in Somersetshire in 1860.⁶ Relegated as women were to the domestic realm, it is hardly surprising that the victims of Victorian murderesses were almost exclusively family members or close acquaintances (Morris 34). Yet the irony of women explicitly abusing the power bestowed on them as defenders of domestic peace was a potent motif in the Victorian cultural imagination. Representations of the domestic murderess had to negotiate the precarious terrain between the ideological conflation of the feminine realm with enabling and protecting life and the inescapable reality that women were eradicating life within that very same

space. As a territory governed by feminine rule, the home became the locus of women's power to do both good and evil.

2. Victorian Femininity, Power and the Mythology of the Bad Woman

In his famous and often-cited lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" (1865), John Ruskin attempts to convince his fellow Victorians that all middle-class women can be queens. Ruskin repeatedly makes reference to women's "power" and "authority", asking not whether women should have access to these privileges but what "portion" of authority they should rightfully possess. Women's power, according to Ruskin, can extend beyond their households and families to "all within their sphere"; women are presented as rulers not only of the home but also of the literal and metaphorical "garden" (110). The phrase "Queens' Gardens" implies more than just the power associated with possession; women are attributed the agency of the gardener, shaping, developing, and tending their flowerbeds. Like the gardener, the middle-class woman has the ability to both nurture and eradicate life. If a woman is good, flowers will spontaneously "rise behind her steps" and drooping harebells be "revive[d]" (141; 142). Ruskin encapsulates the generative and healing power of femininity, locating it within the context of Victorian women's celebrated roles as wives and mothers.

Yet the concept of powerful womanhood was not new to the Victorians. From the earliest Western representations, Woman has been associated with both angelic and demonic power, broadly encompassed by the Mary/Eve binary.⁷ As mother to the Son of God, Mary represents the miraculous, spiritual, life-giving qualities of womankind; conversely, as instigator of the Fall, Eve associated women with sexualised destructiveness from the outset. Although the first woman of Christian mythology gave life as well, literally giving birth to humanity, it is her seduction of

Adam and the subsequent expulsion from the Garden that have become synonymous with her name. Eve, it is tempting to argue, irrevocably let the side down because she failed to tend her grounds with the selflessness and wisdom of Ruskin's queenly gardener. These mythological figures symbolise the opposing forces of women's power that have remained a potent cultural fascination ever since. Mary's image has been transposed into the "good woman" ideal that has existed in every historical period up to the present day; in Victorian iconography she is the woman with flowers rising beneath her feet, the queen of the garden, the angel in the house.

The good woman was integral to Victorian gender ideology and her power should not be underestimated; as embodiment of purity and truth she commanded the worship of her men-folk who pledged allegiance to her as subjects to their queen (Ruskin 119). By the nineteenth century, virtuous womanhood had been elevated to the spiritual realm; women were not just represented as symbolic angels watching over their hearths and homes but as literal angels tending to the needs of all mankind. This period saw a shift in angelology from the conceptualisation of angels as almost exclusively male to their recasting as decisively female, a widespread transformation indicated by the fact that there are virtually no male angels in Victorian art and literature (Auerbach 64). Although this shift was accompanied by a severe restriction of angels' behaviour from the activity and limitless mobility of their male predecessors, such figures continued to symbolise power and authority. The conflation of angelhood with femininity endowed women with "virtually exclusive access to spiritual depths and heights" and the angel's superhuman powers raised her to a level of spiritual authority far above flawed human males (Auerbach 64).

This iconographic association of femininity with guiding and healing powers gave weight to Ruskin's description of women as rejuvenators of mankind. However,

although possessing supernatural abilities, Ruskin's women are not "angels" but "queens". Ruskin's representation of domestic queenship was made both possible and necessary by the presence of a female monarch on the British throne. Queen Victoria was the ultimate embodiment of the powerful good woman, mirroring on a national scale the role of middle-class housewife. She ministered over her empire with maternal tenderness and was regarded as protector and defender of peace and security, keeping external evils at bay in much the same way that her female subjects were expected to preserve the sanctity of the domestic hearth. However, her power was ideologically disruptive as it enabled her to blur the boundary between public and private realms. As holder of the highest office in the nation she was the most public of all public figures, but as a woman she must unavoidably be associated with the private domain according to the ideology of separate spheres. In keeping with the logic of this ideology it was necessary to contain Victoria's power in the domestic realm and there was a tendency to subordinate her public roles to her private, such as in Tennyson's "Dedication to the Queen" where Victoria is referred to as "Wife, Mother, Queen" in that order.

The relinquishing to Parliament of all legal powers of sovereignty during Victoria's reign limited the ideological disturbance caused by a woman on the throne; as Margaret Homans writes, "the terms through which Victorian culture defines and contests woman's 'sphere' uncannily echo the distinctive discourse of constitutional monarchy: passivity, moral power, duty, and being and appearing in lieu of originating or executing politically engaged action" (xx). Victoria's roles as wife and mother were thus inseparable from her role as queen and it was in her interest to emphasise her femininity and domesticity. Early on in Victoria's reign the royal family commissioned Sir Edwin Landseer to paint what became one of the most

famous and reproduced portraits of the royal family, *Windsor Castle in Modern Times* (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Windsor Castle in Modern Times*, Sir Edwin Landseer (1841-45)

The portrait depicts Victoria, Albert, their first child Vicky, and their numerous pet dogs in an idealised domestic setting. Significantly, Albert is given prominent position sitting in the centre of the painting, facing forward, while Victoria is rendered in profile, standing by his side. As Adrienne Munich notes, while Victoria's stance makes her the highest figure in the portrait, she faces her husband "as a servant might approach a seated master or mistress, for in royal protocol the monarch requires others to stand unless given permission to sit". The careful placement of the child and dogs around Albert's central figure puts Victoria "on a par with pets and children, a happy subordinate within a domestic setting" (134-35). Victoria was also photographed in various positions of feminine submission and docility, with her own children and the children of relatives and, in 1862, sitting beneath and gazing up at a bust of her late husband (see Munich 93; 101).

Representations of Victoria as a domestic queen appear to have ensured her success as a constitutional monarch. In marked contrast to her predecessor Elizabeth I, Victoria was not simply a female ruler but a feminine ruler and it was her very femininity that gained her respect and obeisance. Upon Victoria's death in 1901, the minister of the First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio, sermonised that her greatness "was that of a true womanhood. It was her pure womanliness that drew to her the hearts of her people.... There was no sufferer anywhere in her realm who was not sure of the queen's sympathy...[a]nd it was her womanliness that made her a great ruler" (Gladden 22-23). The longest-reigning monarch in British history, Victoria was a vivid reminder that femininity could be powerful. Yet in locating women's power in domesticity, Victoria contributed to the containment of womanhood within the private sphere. Certainly, Ruskin saw such containment as a convenient way to limit female authority and agency. In light of Victoria's presence on the throne, Ruskin recognised the futility of restricting women's influence to the household; women must and would venture beyond the hearth to spread their healing across the nation. However, Ruskin does not consider this to be an entrance into the public sphere; rather, the private sphere expands around the woman to shelter whoever comes within its radius. Wherever a good woman goes "[her] home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot; but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her...shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless" (122-23). Even wandering across the moors in the middle of the night, Ruskin's queenly woman cannot escape the domestic realm; she carries it with her like a membrane which others can penetrate but through which she can never pass.

This non-disposable sphere is Ruskin's solution to the potential ideological problems created by a female monarch. What better way to dissolve the threat of woman's escape from the domestic realm than by shackling that realm to her through forced identification? The woman is not *in* the private sphere, she *is* the private sphere and, as such, her entrance into the masculine public sphere becomes an ideological impossibility. While Ruskin provides woman with the ability to rule, her sovereignty cannot extend beyond the domestic realm. He defines the "separate characters" of Man and Woman as follows:

The Man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest is necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision.... By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation, [sic] The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial...[b]ut he guards the woman from all this. (122)

Thus it is men who operate in the "open world" while women rule over what, to follow Ruskin's lead, must be the closed world of the domestic sphere.

Endowing women with power was problematic, even when that power was safely ensconced in the private realm; while it enabled women to protect and nurture mankind, it also introduced the possibility of evil and violence. Femininity signified nurturance, healing, and giving life; it also signified deceit, jealousy, and sexualised destruction. As Ruskin himself acknowledges, women's use of the gardener's agency to give life hinges on their goodness; when a woman is bad, the combination of

femininity and power can be lethal. Running alongside the myth of the good woman is an even more potent belief in destructive womanhood. While the angel is clearly influential, her power serves the interests of patriarchal society as she dispenses feminine virtue among her earthly disciples. The bad woman, in contrast, can use her formidable power to undermine or subvert patriarchal order, as Eve's example clearly shows. She exploits the weaknesses of mortal men, seducing, deceiving and manipulating them into doing her bidding, often with disastrous or fatal consequences. Yet the bad woman, in her various manifestations, does not subvert Victorian ideology from without; like the angel she is created by that ideology and operates within it. If she disrupts or resists patriarchal order she does so from the inside out, not from an independent position outside, above or beyond it. She is, like all nineteenth-century women, defined on the basis of her sexuality, branded as voracious antithesis to the domestic angel; her appearance, like that of all women, is always given prominence in her characterisation and she is typically represented as either seductively beautiful or grotesquely ugly. The bad woman may choose her identity, but she cannot control what that identity signifies within her culture.

As such, in an age characterised by oppositional logic, the bad woman's power is relegated to the opposite side of the binary of womanhood, not outer but other. For the Victorians, classification was vital for the maintenance of order in what was perceived as an increasingly chaotic world. In particular, the distinction between Self and Other was central to the colonial mission that continued throughout the century. Yet with the Other comes the unknown and with the unknown comes fear; the Victorians "respond[ed] to such fears by attempting to make the unknown world – the pathological, the alien, the abnormal – better-known" (Stott 26). As representatives of the other side of the binary, Eve's daughters held a prominent position in Victorian

cultural mythology, signifying their extreme otherness and the resultant obsession with understanding them in order to reduce the threat they posed. Eve, sinful yet unwitting Fallen Woman, transmuted into the Fatal Woman, Lilith, mythological first wife of Adam and embodiment of demonic femininity with a much more conscious awareness of both the power of her sexuality and her propensity for evil. The Fatal Woman was of such fascination to the Victorians that by the end of the century she had developed into an archetype, known by the early twentieth century as the *femme fatale*, which was incessantly and obsessively reiterated in fin-de-siecle art and literature. Rebecca Stott, following Toril Moi, argues that, in the good woman/bad woman binary, the *femme fatale* “signifies all that lies beyond the frontier of sign ‘/’: the signifying frontier marking the distinction of the two elements of the binary opposition: the sign that marks the end of order and the beginning of Otherness” (39). The Victorians made it their business to know the Other; locked on the wrong side of the forward-slash, the bad woman could be studied from a safe distance.

3. Gender and Violence: Knowing the Violent Woman

The face of crime in nineteenth-century Britain was changing. The establishment of a police force in 1829 and a detective force in 1842 indicates that the detection and apprehension of criminals was becoming a greater priority (Maunder and Moore 1). Crimes against the person surpassed crimes against property as the most serious felonies; penalties for violent offences increased from the late eighteenth century while punishments for many property offences were reduced in the 1830s, and legislative reforms such as the Offences Against the Person Acts of 1828 and 1861 reflect this shift (Wiener, *Men of Blood* 19-21). Male violence in particular was being

targeted. Prior to this time violence was a central and valued component of masculinity; of eighteenth-century England, Robert Shoemaker writes,

Men were expected to assert their independence by resorting to violence when their honesty or authority was challenged. Formally embodied in the duel and boxing match..., the use of violence to assert and defend male honour publicly was widespread. In conflicts with other men, men needed to demonstrate their courage, strength and independence – their manliness – by exhibiting their willingness to fight. (154)

Physical aggression was an unavoidable and necessary aspect of manliness, a belief reflected in the reluctance to prosecute men for acts of violence. However, the Victorian period saw a “stigmatization and criminalization” of male violence; men were more likely to be convicted of violent assaults and prison sentences replaced financial compensation to victims as the standard punishment (Wiener, “Criminalization of Men” 199; Archer, ““Men Behaving Badly”” 42-43).

This intolerance of interpersonal violence was accompanied by what Wiener has termed a “reconstruction of gender” whereby women “were increasingly seen as both more moral and more vulnerable than hitherto, while men were being described as more dangerous” (*Men of Blood* 3). As such, male violence against women became widely unacceptable for the first time. Up until this period not only were husbands permitted to “discipline” their wives using physical force, but this was regarded as their duty as master of the household.⁸ By the nineteenth century, as Anna Clark writes, “older more brutally patriarchal attitudes which blatantly sanctioned wifebeating” were replaced by “a newer ideology of separate spheres in which men were to love and protect their wives, and wives were to submit affectionately” (36). The demonising of male violence against women manifested itself in increased

prosecution rates for domestic assault and homicide.⁹ Men occupied the contradictory positions of women's biggest threat of violence and their greatest protection from it; violent by nature, men were believed to require constant controls, both external and self-generated, to keep their aggressive tendencies in check. While the male was deemed to be the exclusive perpetrator of violence, the female was reduced to the victimised object of his attacks.

All this, of course, took place on an ideological level. Victorian women did commit acts of violence, even extreme acts like murder, albeit much less frequently than men. Ideological workings, though, have important implications for the way violent women were constructed and represented. Female violence was deemed unnatural and unfeminine, a sign of demonic possession or of madness; paradoxically, it was both intensely vilified and regularly excused or explained away. The reluctance to believe that women were capable of murder led to some inventive ways of eliminating the murderess's culpability, from recasting her as victim of an immoral man to diagnosing her as insane and hence reducing her responsibility for her actions. Nevertheless, female violence and criminality were substantial enough to warrant study by the scientific community. While men's violence was not sanctioned, it was at least deemed natural and within the boundaries of normal male behaviour; the violent woman, in contrast, behaved unnaturally and hence established herself as categorically distinct from female humanity. Criminal women were compared to the other significant Others of nineteenth-century thought, namely "primitive" peoples and animals. An article in *The Cornhill* in 1866, the same magazine that had serialised Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*, with its infamous fraudster and murderess Lydia Gwilt, the previous year, proclaimed that women of the criminal class are not women at all and that "the honour of womanhood requires that a new appellation be invented for

them” (153). The author, typically thought to be Mrs M. E. Owen, suggests that criminal women occupy an entirely different classificatory category to the rest of womankind; they have no claim to the identity of Woman and must be marked by another label, one that does not already exist but must be invented. Female offenders slide down the evolutionary ladder, past the racial Other, to the level of the animal. Mrs Owen decries them as “more uncivilized than the savage, more degraded than the slave, less true to all natural and womanly instincts than the untutored squaw of a North American Indian tribe” (153). Four years earlier, Henry Mayhew articulated a common belief when he wrote that the female offender lacks the moral capacity “to govern and restrain the animal propensities of her nature” and is thus “reduced to the same condition as a brute” (467). Taking the degeneracy of the bad woman to the extreme, Mrs Owen attacks her for her lack of motherly feeling:

Of maternal love such a creature can know but little,—not enough to bear comparison with that which is bestowed upon the offspring of the lower animals. The mother of these latter will do her best to shield her young from harm : the depraved mother knowingly places her daughter in the way of temptation. She urges evil upon her by inciting her to put her hands upon every thing she can get hold of, by receiving what is thus pilfered. In short, she has no hesitation in doing by her child what her own mother did by her : she will sell her, body and soul, for food and drink! (157-58)

The bad woman is reduced not just to the level of the “lower animals” but to a position below them, credited with possessing not even the most fundamental of feminine instincts. Segregated completely from earthly life, the criminal woman is banished to the realm of the mythical and the monstrous.

The perceived monstrousness of the female criminal is demonstrated by ethno-criminologists Caesar Lombroso and William Ferrero's *The Female Offender*, a meta-analysis of studies of female criminality across Europe, in which criminal women are classified according to their anatomical and psychological characteristics.¹⁰ It reveals the overlap and interdependence between science and mythology, using a discourse of objective "fact" to corroborate the female offender's mythological status. Born criminals (as opposed to "occasional criminals" who have no special physiognomy) are referred to by the authors as "anthropological anomalies", possessing severe anatomical defects known as "characteristics of degeneration" (Morrison xv).

Researchers weighed, measured and analysed every aspect of offenders' bodies, from their height and build to the length of their limbs and the shape of their facial features, and compared their findings with those obtained from studies of normal women. From their data they were able to construct a monstrous prototype of female criminality. The female offender had a heavier lower jaw and a smaller cranial capacity than normal women or "women of good lives"; she was more likely to have crooked teeth, an enormous nasal bone and prominent cheek bones (Lombroso and Ferrero 21; 29).

Despite having fewer anomalies than male offenders, "a comparison of the [female] criminal skull with the skulls of normal women reveals the fact that female criminals approximate more to males, both criminal and normal, than to normal women" (29).

Female criminals were also distinguished by other grotesque and unfeminine features, ranging from hairy moles to cleft palates, all of which were regarded as outward signs of their moral degradation. Understandably, the murderess, whose crime was greatest, was the most hideous of all female criminals. Lombroso and Ferrero profile several exceedingly violent women and record their facial and bodily abnormalities: a woman, aged forty, who killed her husband with multiple blows of a hatchet and

threw his body under the stairs had an asymmetrical face, a hollowed-out nose, projecting ears and an enormous jaw; another, aged sixty, who strangled her husband and then hung him up to give the appearance of suicide is described as having a broad jaw, numerous wrinkles, enormous frontal sinuses, a very thin upper lip and deep-set eyes; a thirty-four-year-old who poisoned her husband with arsenic had facial down “so long as to resemble a beard” (89-90).

Above everything else, the authors of this meta-analysis are fascinated by the female offender’s hair. Almost always dark and often abundant, the hair is indicative of deviousness and violence; after all, “[a]rchaeology...has furnished us with an example of thick, fair hair in Messalina, and records also the abundant tresses of Faustina” (Lombroso and Ferrero 71). As wives of Roman emperors, these women are historical figures whose identities have been mythologised into symbols of sexual insatiability and perverse violence. Messalina personifies lust and sexually motivated vengeance, supposedly ordering her husband to execute men who resisted her voracious advances, while Faustina is said to have committed multiple adulteries and, according to one extraordinary legend, bathed in the blood of an executed gladiator and then lay with her husband (“Faustina the Younger”). While she focuses primarily on golden rather than dark hair, Elisabeth Gitter has noted how the Victorians “discovered in the image of women’s hair a variety of rich and complex meanings, ascribing to it powers both magical and symbolic”; for the mythological “grand woman” of the Victorian imagination, her hair was the source of her enchanting and often fatal power. Thick, luxurious hair had multiple interconnected significations, from a marker of vanity and narcissism to a net which trapped men to an analogy for the threads of the woman’s unspoken narrative (936-38). For Lombroso and Ferrero it

represented both beauty and danger, enabling an otherwise diabolical young woman to appear benign and thus go undetected:

[W]hen the hair is black and plentiful...and the eyes are bright, a not unpleasing appearance is presented. In short, let a female delinquent be young and we can overlook her degenerate type, and even regard her as beautiful; the sexual instinct misleading us here as it does in making us attribute to women more sensitiveness and passion than they really possess. And in the same way, when she is being tried on a criminal charge, we are inclined to excuse, as noble impulses of passion, acts which arise from the most cynical calculations. (97)

Women's beauty is dangerous both in its own right, in the magical and seductive power it bestows, and because it conceals the true nature of the evil woman from her unsuspecting male victims. However, while a born offender could be beautiful in her youth, she would inevitably degenerate physically to reveal her moral character.

For Lombroso and Ferrero, criminal offending was atavistic in origin. In a bizarre extension of Darwinian sexual selection, the authors hypothesise the reason why there are so few female born offenders: primitive man “not only refused to *marry* a deformed female, but ate her, while, on the other hand, preserving for his enjoyment the handsome woman who gratified his peculiar instincts” (109; Lombroso and Ferrero's emphasis). As a result of the primordial male's curious gastronomic tendencies, women in the late nineteenth century are less “essentially criminal” and are much more likely to be occasional delinquents than degenerate offenders (111). Rather than committing calculated or planned offences, “the majority of female delinquents are led into crime either by the suggestion of a third person or by irresistible temptation”, that is, by forces beyond their control (147). Although a very

small minority of women might be even more scheming and devious than their male counterparts, the vast majority of female offenders are considered to have little agency in their criminal activities.

In its systematic and meticulous itemisation of the female offender, Lombroso and Ferrero's text is a comprehensive reflection of popular Victorian beliefs about women's violence. Within this ideology, the subject positions of the murderess in representation are limited to two broad types: passive victim of a bad man, or monster, a class that encompasses the distinct but related subgroups of evil, madness and organic deformity. However, representations of the Victorian murderess show that she is a figure who will not fit neatly into any of these categories. As Piya Pal-Lapinski notes, even within Lombroso and Ferrero's text the female offenders resist the classification imposed upon them; more "*hybrid*" than male criminals, these women are "ambiguously positioned along the spectrum of civilization and savagery" (112; Pal-Lapinski's emphasis). Furthermore, although the murderess typically works from home, the extreme nature of her crimes exposes her to highly public construction and consumption in the form of sensational trials and media representations, illustrating that, if impenetrable, the domestic realm of Ruskin's imagination is at least transparent. Ironically, the more the murderess's story is told the less knowable she becomes; with each successive attempt to reconstruct her identity that identity becomes less and less stable. Although attributed with the agency of poisoning her lover, Madeleine Smith was recast during her trial as the innocent victim of a wicked man. Constance Kent was portrayed as a mistreated child before her confession and a "mystery" afterwards; a prison inspector found her performatives irreconcilable: "It was almost impossible to believe that this insignificant, inoffensive little person could have cut her infant brother's throat under circumstances of peculiar atrocity" (qtd. in

Hartman 129). The multiplicity of the murderess's subjectivity renders her ultimately unclassifiable, permanently suspended between categories.

4. Gender, Narrative and Performance: Representing the Murderess in Victorian Fiction

Growing concern over the detection, prosecution, conviction and punishment of criminal behaviour was accompanied by advances in communication which enabled the widespread dissemination of crime in representation; together these two developments ensured that criminality held a firm position in the Victorian consciousness. Rising literacy levels and advances in printing and transport technology resulted in the rapid distribution of mass-produced, low-cost newspapers, broadsheets and periodicals, all of which included crime as one of their primary subjects (Sutter 159). In addition to crime itself, the representation of crime was a cause of considerable anxiety. Because of its presumed veracity, the press was seen as a moral guide for society and, as such, the frequent reportage of crime was held directly responsible for inciting unlawful activity (Rowbotham and Stevenson 37; Sutter 161). However, it was fictional representations of crime that produced the greatest concern. Gavin Sutter notes how the cheap crime serials or “penny dreadfuls” which were targeted at a young working-class readership created something of a “moral panic”; although there was no evidence of a correlation between reading penny dreadfuls and committing crimes, this literature was nonetheless blamed for growing juvenile delinquency rates (163; 166). Similarly, the fictional portrayal of criminal and transgressive women led to anxiety about the effect this would have on young female readers who were deemed to be “psychologically and even physiologically more at risk from their reading than men” (Debenham 211). A more

unusual and spectacular creature than her male counterpart, the female murderer held particular appeal as a subject of fiction. Many of the period's major novelists portrayed violent women in their works: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia*, George Eliot's *Hettie Sorrel*, Charlotte Brontë's *Bertha Mason*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess d'Urberville*, Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley*, Mrs Henry Wood's *Charlotte Norris*, and Wilkie Collins's *Lydia Gwilt* to name but a few.

The "sensation" genre, to which these last three examples subscribe, was a particular cause for concern.¹¹ These novels enjoyed immense if short-lived popularity in the 1860s, largely because of their tendency to represent exciting and horrifying events. The frequency with which the novels portrayed women behaving badly suggested "a special relationship between femininity and crime" which went against the common consensus that men were the more inherently criminal sex (Trodd 96). The action was typically located in domestic settings, drawing on the fear that women could be the source of violence infiltrating the home. Sensation novels represented violent women partly because of their shock-value; as Barbara Allen notes, "dangerous women are infinitely more interesting and exciting" than virtuous ones (195). Yet sensation writers also used their fiction to draw attention to the problematics of separate spheres ideology which denied women a productive outlet for their activity and to the subordinate legal position of women which caused them to turn to illicit and devious behaviours. The prominence of issues concerning women's place in society was underlined by the fact that these novels were often written by women and were believed to have a large female readership (Debenham 211; Tromp et al. xviii). As the label indicates, sensation novels focused on extraordinary or unusual events which, to quote one of its key proponents Wilkie Collins, did not necessarily "adhere to everyday realities" (*Basil* xxxvi). However, they dealt with the

same domestically located material readers were confronted with every time they opened a newspaper: sexual profligacy, bigamy, divorce, domestic violence, criminal impersonations, wrongful incarcerations and, most sensational of all, murder.

Sensation novels were by definition plot-driven; criminal and domestic intrigues were played out in intricate and convoluted plots which gradually unfolded to reveal a shocking secret or to resolve a mystery. ““Action, action, action!”” reviewer Henry Mansel disparagingly remarked in 1863, “is the first thing needful, and the second, and the third” (486). Novels which centre on the murderess’s plot illustrate women’s contradictory relationship to power: fictional murderesses are, on the one hand, helpless products of plot, carried along by the momentum of the stories that have been created around them; however, they also engage in active plotting, often planning their murder attempts with incredible care and precision. Mary Braddon is typically credited as beginning the trend of the sensational murderess in 1862 with the blond-ringleted, angel-tempered Lady Audley who, among other indiscretions, shoves her husband down a well and sets fire to an inn with her nephew inside. Not to be outdone, Wilkie Collins created his own fiery murderess, *Armada*’s (1866) Lydia Gwilt, whose homicidal rage pushed the boundaries of Victorian representational possibility to their limits; Collins went on to depict additional, less psychologically complex female killers in *Man and Wife* (1870) and *The Legacy of Cain* (1888). These novels construct heroines whose primary purpose is to plot; the women concoct, plan, re-plan and finally carry out their violent schemes against the men who stand in their way.

In the intricate weaving of their plots, these novels draw attention to the processes by which the murderess’s identity is constructed; in particular they show how the murderess’s shaping of her own subjectivity is constantly conflicting with

that undertaken by patriarchal discourses. The murderess's plot unfolds through a process of narration; her story is related, sometimes by others, sometimes by herself, and through this narration her life and identity are created.¹² As a detective novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* reveals how the violent woman's identity is pieced together by legal and medical discourses until she forms a coherent and simplistic whole which differs sharply from the more complex subjectivity Lady Audley creates for herself. Wilkie Collins more explicitly draws attention to these disparate constructions in his common utilisation of multiple narrative perspectives; the murderess's own narration competes with various other voices, from patriarchal figureheads to minor characters, to create multiple, parallel subjectivities.

Powerful Victorian womanhood is a product of representation. As Homans writes of Queen Victoria, "[i]f seeming is a kind of doing, then whatever her agency was it chiefly took the form of representation: self-representations such as books and performances, but also authorized and even unauthorized representations by others" (xxxv). Angel iconography and treatises like Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens" show how representations could endow women with power, authority and agency; similarly, they were just as capable of curbing or eradicating that power. Hence women's ability to engage in self-representation was tantamount to gaining power; in representing themselves, women had ultimate control over the construction of their identities. However, the extent of Victorian women's self-representation was limited, largely due to the nature of the speaking rights granted to women in the nineteenth century. Like women themselves, their discursive acts were expected to remain largely within the private realm and women who brought their opinions, whether verbal or written, into public risked being labelled unfeminine, improper and even deviant. As Robyn Warhol explains,

For the nineteenth-century woman who had something to say, finding a safe space in which to say it was not easy. If she restricted herself to addressing her own domestic circle, her 'true womanhood' could remain intact, but she would have to be content with the rather abstract prospect of influencing the public world indirectly through her personal impact on her husband, brothers, and sons. If she tried instead to speak in public...she might extend her range of influence. She ran the risk, however, of endangering not only her feminine reputation, but also the public perception of her female sexuality. (159)

The female orators Warhol refers to were particularly objectionable because, as figures operating in the public sphere, their bodies as well as their ideas were on display. Hidden behind her text, the woman writer was more acceptable but was still restricted by beliefs about appropriate female behaviour (Warhol 165-66). Warhol draws on narratologist Seymour Chatman's distinction between story (the sequence of events) and discourse (how those events are related), arguing that the "gendered difference" of Victorian writing "is not one of story, but of discourse"; that is, the restriction was not so much on what women said (although this was, of course, limited) but on *how* they said it and, taking this a step further, *where* they said it (170). Narration was a highly gendered activity, carried out in highly gendered spaces.

Female narrators are not uncommon in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction. Fathers of the English novel Samuel Richardson and Daniel Defoe pioneered female narrators and Victorian novelists followed suit, giving their heroines considerable narrative rights to tell their own stories. However, generally speaking there were significant differences between appropriate men's and women's narratives,

namely to do with the degree of authority granted to the narrator. Alison Case sees the distinction between masculine and feminine narration as forming part of a “gendered convention of first-person narration” in the British novel; specifically, masculine narration necessitates “narrative confidence, competence, and control” while feminine narration “is characterized by the restriction of the female narrator to the role of narrative *witness*; that is, by her exclusion from the active shaping of narrative form and meaning” or from what Case refers to as “*plotting* and *preaching*” (4; Case’s emphasis). As passive, feeble creatures women were able to describe events but they were not believed to possess the discursive authority necessary to explain or interpret those events.

As one of the earliest English novels, Richardson’s *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) laid the foundations for the convention of feminine narration that was carried through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. Pamela’s narrative emphasises the lack of control she has over her situation; in a series of letters to her family, the imprisoned Pamela relates the events that happen to her as the victim of Mr B.’s incessant, salacious plotting. *Pamela* literalises the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century symbolic connection between incapacity and virtue. Its heroine’s powerlessness is closely associated with her artlessness which is fundamental to the preservation of her honour; her agency must be eliminated or she risks being construed as a wilful participant in Mr B.’s plot (Case 23). However, though she has little control over what is done to her by Mr B. and his staff, as first-person narrator Pamela is responsible for her own representation through letter-writing. As her seduction by Mr B. progresses, Pamela constructs herself alternately as terrified victim and virtuous martyr; her repeated deliberations over her possible escape countered by her sense of duty – “he is my master, and if he bids me to do a thing that

I *can* do, I think I *ought* to do it” – paint her as mindful both of her task as a woman to preserve her chastity and of her obligation as a servant, and allow her to remain in the house without her honour being called into question (147-48; Richardson’s emphasis).

The power that Pamela has in constructing her own identity is highlighted by Henry Fielding’s parodic response. *Shamela* (1741) recasts Pamela as a morally lax schemer, plotting to ensnare Mr B(ooby) for her husband, and rewrites scenes from Richardson’s novel that portray Pamela as virtuous and pure. When Pamela dresses herself as a country girl in preparation for her return to her parents, she describes her outfit as being an accurate reflection of her identity; *Shamela*, on the other hand, purposely assumes a costume as part of her “Stratagem” to entice Mr Booby, echoing the suggestion by Richardson’s Mr B. that Pamela puts on a “disguise” to “attract” him (*Shamela* 320; *Pamela* 90). Implicit in Fielding’s parody is the suggestion that, given the autonomy of self-representation, women are able to present themselves in a way that best serves their interests. The parody also illustrates how women’s self-representation alters depending on the audience for whom it is intended. Pamela addresses her letters to her father who constantly reminds her to be virtuous and fears her inevitable undoing at her master’s hands; emphasising women’s conspiratorial tendencies, Fielding has *Shamela* correspond with her mother who participates in the scheme to make her daughter Mrs Booby. Women writers, the *Shamela* text suggests, are acutely aware of their readership and they adjust their narrative self-representations accordingly.

Ironically, the most common mode of writing women have participated in historically is defined by its lack of audience. As a form of private meditation and reflection, the diary has become synonymous with complete and truthful revelation and, as such, with an almost sanctified level of privacy. However, diaries too have

their readerships: women across the centuries have written diaries to share with their friends and sisters and to pass on to their children; nineteenth-century husbands and fathers considered it their right to read the private musings of their female relatives; and the Victorian period saw something of a publishing craze where diaries, both real and fabricated, were exposed for public consumption.¹³ Even when diaries are not intended to be read by others, as in the case of Lydia Gwilt's diary in *Armada*, the subject of the next chapter, they still have a readership in the form of the diarist who presents herself for her own reading and rereading.

Through a process of continual rewriting and rereading, the diarist attempts to gain greater insight into and understanding of her self; this practice is mirrored in the Western cultural task of continually re-presenting the murderess. As an inherently contradictory figure, the Victorian murderess has been a site of persistent revisitation throughout the twentieth century. Many authors have rewritten real-life cases, such as those of Lizzie Borden in the US, England's Florence Bravo and Adelaide Bartlett, and Scotland's Madeleine Smith. Other writers have created their own murderesses, for example Caleb Carr's late-century child killer, Peter Ackroyd's sadistic serial murderess, and Toni Morrison's infanticidal slave.¹⁴ This repetition suggests a desire to resolve the Victorian murderess, to gain access to her essential "truth", to learn her secret once and for all. However, the sheer volume of present-day representations suggests that, just as the nineteenth-century murderess is a reiteration of the sirens and sorceresses of the earliest Western mythology, the female killer remains an elusive figure and will continue to be reproduced endlessly in the future. Nonetheless, Atwood's return to the Victorian murderess in *Alias Grace* provides a potential solution to the problem of knowing the violent woman; it is through self-

representation, in both its public and private forms, that insight into the murderess begins to be achieved.

Chapter Two

Rebellion and Conformity: Narrative Competition and Female Subjectivity in

Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*

Sensation novels were frequently concerned with the plight of women in mid-Victorian society. Their focus on crime in the private realm saw their female characters alternating between the roles of helpless victims of male abuse and transgressive rebels who resist their containment. Typically regarded as the father of the sensation genre, Wilkie Collins began his novelistic career depicting the sufferings of women in oppressive marriages, highlighting their powerlessness under the law. The heroine of his first sensation novel *The Woman in White* (1860) suffers at the hands of a tyrannical husband and the minor character Madame Fosco is ruled by her husband with an iron rod, while Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name* (1863) must marry the cousin who possesses her inheritance. Collins later went on to explore the unconventional and often criminal methods by which women, denied the ability to protect themselves legally, attempted to gain liberty from unbearable situations or improve their status in society. *Armadale*'s Lydia Gwilt, the focus of this chapter, poisons her violent husband in order to be with her lover and then attempts to kill another man to better her social position. In *Man and Wife*, Hester Dethridge takes revenge on her abusive husband by murdering him in his sleep; although Hester appeals to the law numerous times, she receives no assistance and violence is represented as her only hope for "deliverance" (592). In *The Legacy of Cain*, Collins explores the potential hereditary component to women's violence. As daughter of a convicted murderess, there is a sense of inevitability about the fate of Helena Gracedieu who attempts to murder her lover when he transfers his affection to her sister. Despite their different motivations, however, all Collins's murderesses are

reacting to the restraints imposed upon them by the patriarchal institution of the law which denies them the same rights as men.

Because of this interest in rebellious women, many twentieth-century critics have focused on the radicalism of Collins's heroines. In 1944 Dorothy L. Sayers wrote that "[i]n his whole treatment of women [Collins] stands leagues apart from his period". Although not interested in feminism, Collins was "the most genuinely feminist of all the nineteenth-century novelists, because he [was] the only one capable of seeing women without sexual bias and of respecting them as human individuals in their own right" (viii). More recently Philip O'Neill argues that Collins wrote against common stereotypes of femininity and in doing so "deliberately subvert[ed] the popular literary representations of women" while Virginia Morris maintains that Collins "was convinced that women were not only as intelligent and determined as men, but equally convulsed by the agonies of moral choice and equally capable of asocial or amoral solutions" (O'Neill 5; Morris 105). Yet, as Sue Lonoff reminds us, Collins's treatment of women is characterised more than anything else by ambivalence:

However independently his heroines pursue their goals, they ultimately set their independence aside—to marry, or accede to a husband's wishes, or promote someone else's happiness. If a vibrant and beautiful woman appears in the foreground of a story, in the background there is sure to lurk at least one Victorian stereotype—a shrew, a Mrs. Grundy, an overbearing matron, a canting Evangelist, a smug bluestocking—figures as unattractive as his heroines are inviting. (138)

In addition to this split between unconventional and stereotypical female characters, Collins creates similar splits within his heroines, balancing their bold and rebellious

qualities with an equal measure of conservative feminine traits that ultimately eliminates their power. The highly ambiguous Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* accuses men of taking women “body and soul to themselves, and fasten[ing] our helpless lives to theirs as they chain a dog to his kennel” (183). Yet Collins could himself be accused of chaining up his female characters when they stray too far outside the boundaries of appropriate femininity. Although his novels are critical of patriarchal attempts to contain women, Collins in fact participates in that very containment through the representation of his heroines.

Collins’s ambivalence towards women is evident from his earliest work and is embodied most completely in the figure of Marian Halcombe. Marian is an incongruous blend of fragile, passive femininity and strong, active masculinity, a combination that is reflected in her physical appearance. She is a figurative hybrid, possessing a “male” head and a “female” body. The novel’s hero Walter Hartright describes her as having a form of “rare beauty” and an attitude of “unaffected grace”, a waist that is “perfection in the eyes of man”, and “an elegance of every movement of her limbs” (31). This is decisively and comically contrasted with the repulsive manliness of her face:

The lady’s complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair.... Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. (32)

Marian is capable of critical thought and rationality, but she is also burdened by her inescapable femininity. While she has the “resolution” Collins associates with men, she expresses reluctance to perform what is required of her as her “courage [is] only a woman’s courage, after all” (325; 326). Anne Delamayn suffers from the same incapacity in *Man and Wife* where the limits of women’s courage are once more emphasised. Forced to live in a house with a husband she believes might turn violent, Anne’s nerve fails her:

Her position at the cottage tried her physical courage: it called on her to rise superior to the sense of actual bodily danger – while that danger was lurking in the dark. There, the woman’s nature sank under the stress laid on it – there, her courage could strike no root in the strength of her love – there, the animal instincts were the instincts appealed to; and the firmness wanted was the firmness of a man. (566)

Although Collins obviously recognised women’s power and their potential for decisive and deliberate action, he nonetheless felt it necessary to limit this power by endowing his women with conventional feminine qualities that deprive them of agency and authority.

Ultimately, Collins’s representations show clear correlations between femininity and weakness on the one hand and masculinity and strength on the other. It is more than a suppressive legal system that contains his female characters; as a function of their sex they lack the bravery and firmness to effect change in their lives. Consequently, when Collins’s women are required to perform courageous feats they must take on male roles. When Marian temporarily replaces Walter as her sister’s protector, she also adopts his masculinity; to play the role of detective by eavesdropping on Sir Percival and Count Fosco, she must literally shed her feminine

costume for a more masculine alternative. She removes her silk gown so its rustling does not betray her and switches the “cumbersome parts of [her] underclothing” for a flannel petticoat, further disguising herself in an androgynous black hooded cloak. Her new outfit enables the same movement and flexibility as a man: “In my ordinary evening costume,” she tells the reader, “I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I” (326). Marian’s activity involves more than a change of outfit; it involves a change of roles whereby the heroine becomes an honorary man. Only by adopting a masculine persona, Collins suggests, can a woman act effectively. Even then, Marian’s efforts fail; her constitutional feminine weakness causes her to fall into a fever which prevents her from taking her schemes to completion.

Collins’s tendency to endow women with power only to contain and qualify it is evident in *Armadale*, his first novel to represent a murderess as a central character. Because of the highly threatening nature of Lydia’s behaviour, Collins goes to extreme lengths to limit her power. From one perspective, Collins’s depiction of a passionate, vengeful woman with a propensity for violence and overt sexuality is a clear rebellion against Victorian representational norms, and reviewers were understandably outraged by her. One described her as “fouler than the refuse of the streets” while another asserted that she was “one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have ever blackened fiction” (*Spectator* 9 Jun. 1866; Chorley). *The London Quarterly Review* went so far as to state that her influence on the reading public was so morally corrupting she should never have been created (Oct. 1866). However, Collins moderates the radicalism of his murderess through a process of erasure which ultimately renders her completely powerless and ineffective. Like

Marian Halcombe, Anne Delamayne and many of Collins's other heroines, Lydia is brought down by her own femininity and is overpowered by more authoritative male influences.

1. The Murderess as Shadow

To an extent, the process of erasing Lydia begins before her narrative is even told. Although Lydia seems to be the author of her narrative it has been pre-written and is not, strictly speaking, her own. Her actions have all been dictated by Fate, conceptualised in the novel as a male narrative that has been handed down to Midwinter by his father and reinforced by Allan in a dream. Everything that Lydia does has already been plotted by a masculine force completely beyond her control and she simply steps into the part she was born to fill. Allan's dream dictates that he will see "the Shadow of a Woman" standing beside a pool; when Allan first meets Lydia she is standing by the water, "the living Woman, in the Shadow's place" (141; 266). The dream also describes a "Woman-Shadow" handing a drink to Allan that causes him to faint; this scene is repeated when Lydia tries to poison Allan by putting arsenic in his lemonade (563). Although Lydia believes her actions are self-directed, she is simply playing out a narrative authored by a male-controlled force.

The figure of the murderess is a shadow lurking over the *Armada* narrative. Shadows do not possess intrinsic identities; instead they are reflections or echoes of identities. To a certain degree every murderess in representation is a shadow of the women who came before her and Lydia repeats some of the typical features of the mythological bad woman. An early example of the *femme fatale* type, Lydia is highly sexualised and seductively beautiful; her fiendish red hair is "superbly luxuriant in its growth" and her lips are "full, rich and sensual" (277). Lydia's conscious but

understated utilisation of her sexuality is illustrated by a description of her making tea for Midwinter:

Her magnificent red hair flashed crimson in the candle-light, as she turned her head hither and thither, searching, with an easy grace, for the things she wanted in the tray.... In the lightest word she said, in the least thing she did, there was something that gently solicited the heart of the man who sat with her. Perfectly modest in her manner, possessed to perfection of the graceful restraints and refinements of a lady, she had all the allurements that feast the eye, all the Siren-invitations that seduce the sense – a subtle suggestiveness in her silence, and a sexual sorcery in her smile. (383)

Likened to the Siren, Collins's mid-Victorian murderess harks back to the sorceress of the most ancient Western mythology, making her simply one more reiteration of the evil woman type.

At first glance it seems that, although utilising aspects of this type, Collins writes against it by endowing his murderess with a fraught history and a highly developed psychology in an attempt to explain her deviant behaviour.¹ Yet this does not mean that Lydia has ownership of her identity. Collins borrows the identities and circumstances of other criminal women, both real and fictional, for his murderess. He draws aspects of Lydia's case from that of Madeleine Smith who went to trial in 1857 for the poisoning of her secret fiancé Emile L'Angelier.² In the back-story to the novel *Miss Gwilt*, formerly Mrs Waldron, is prosecuted for poisoning her first husband. Lydia and her Cuban lover Manuel write clandestine letters to one another during their affair, the majority of which are destroyed, mirroring the correspondence that formed the basis of Madeleine and Emile's relationship. The defence's argument in the Madeleine Smith trial was that Emile had morally corrupted Madeleine and

hence was the source of the poison that killed him; similarly, it is widely believed that Manuel supplied Lydia with the poison and that this makes him culpable, although she murders him by her own hands. The Home Secretary in Lydia's case accepts the common rationalisation that behind every murderous woman there is an evil male manipulator pulling the strings and grants her an official pardon, mimicking Madeleine Smith's "Not Proven" verdict. Like Madeleine and many other Victorian murderesses, Mrs Waldron is represented extensively in print media, as illustrated by Mr Bashwood's comment that "'I am one of the few people who didn't read the Trial'" (525). Lydia's history, then, is not unique; it forms part of the endless reiteration of the murderess in the public realm.

Lydia's plot to become Allan's widow is also a repetition, this time of the schemes of a fictional woman of Collins's own creation who is herself based on real-life impersonations such as the infamous Tichborne case.³ The idea of impersonating Mrs Armadale occurs to Lydia after reading an old letter from Manuel detailing the case of "a married woman charged with fraudulently representing herself to be the missing widow of an officer in the merchant service, who was supposed to have drowned" in order to inherit his fortune (445). The woman is able to pass herself off as the officer's wife because his name is identical to her husband's. Although when Manuel wrote the letter Lydia's situation did not resemble the unnamed woman's, Lydia's life is shown to be progressing towards the time when it maps onto the woman's, when Lydia can say that the woman's case "has come to be like *my* case at last" (446; Collins's emphasis). Reinforcing the fact that nothing belonging to Lydia is original, the outcome of the plot is replicated as well. The officer is rescued and returns to confront his "widow" who declares she would have killed him had she known he was still alive; similarly, Allan narrowly escapes drowning at sea and Lydia

attempts to murder him on his return to dry land. Lydia's is a third-hand plot, borrowed from a fictional creation who was herself recycled from real-life personation cases. In effect, Lydia plagiarises her plot; although she is still given the agency to perform it, she is not its author. Like the majority of Collins's female creations, Lydia is more absence than presence; she does not possess a unique history or identity and she is not given the capacity for original thought or authorship. From the outset, Lydia's self is little more than a shadow.

Given this erasure of Lydia's identity, Collins's decision to allow his murderess to construct a more substantial "second self" is a surprising instance of authorial ambivalence (545). Lydia creates this other identity in her diary which documents her convoluted schemes to become Allan Armadale's widow. The diary enables the murderess to represent herself from her own perspective and as such it affords her considerable narrative agency. In many ways, the diary works against the Shadow narrative that has been written for Lydia; it constitutes her attempt to assert control over both her plot and her identity. As discussed in the previous chapter, for the Victorian woman self-representation was an act of power and the diary clearly functions as a means of personal empowerment for Lydia. Through her private writing she eludes patriarchal attempts to define and contain her by constructing her own identity for her own personal consumption. In doing so, she attempts to write over patriarchal narratives, endeavouring to violently eliminate the men who prevent her from writing the life she desires.

2. Diaries and Self-Representation: Women's Writing as Poison

The alternative identity Lydia creates in her diary is the exact opposite of the Shadow: it is an active self, a powerful self, a self whose principal occupation is "plotting and

planning” (547). Above all, in direct defiance of his decision to eliminate Lydia’s authorial control over her plot, Collins creates a second self who is a prolific writer; Lydia authors numerous letters in addition to her long and detailed journal. In something akin to Multiple Personality Syndrome, Lydia’s two selves are in constant competition throughout her diary, both vying for control over the writer. The Shadow self encroaches into Lydia’s diary until she begins to identify with it: “I am the woman who tried to drown herself; the woman who started the series of accidents which put young Armadale in possession of his fortune; the woman who has come to Thorpe-Ambrose to marry him for his fortune now that he has got it; and, more extraordinary still, the woman who stood in the Shadow’s place at the pool!” (426). The Shadow self is constantly threatening to consume Lydia’s autonomous identity by reducing her to a character in a pre-written narrative. In the face of this imminent erasure, Lydia’s writing becomes a means of preserving her tenuous grasp on her identity.

Harriet Blodgett argues that all women’s diaries have the function of asserting selfhood: “A diary is an act of language that, by speaking of one’s self, sustains one’s sense of being a self, with an autonomous and significant identity.... [D]iaries support and reinforce the female sense of self, whereas patriarchal societies do not” (*Centuries* 5; 63). Lydia’s writing is necessary for her sense of self and the cessation of her writing is accompanied by a loss of her identity. When she conforms to the patriarchal script and marries Midwinter, everything she owns – her body, her property, her “thought[s]” – is handed over to her husband as her identity is absorbed into his; it is no coincidence that the wedding also corresponds with Lydia closing her diary and abandoning her autonomous self for what she believes will be the last time (515). However, just two months later she reopens the diary and begins to reconstruct

her identity. In rereading her past entries she effectively maps her current self onto her former self, fulfilling her desire to “live [her] life over again” at a time when she felt she had ownership over her situation (547). Without her diary Lydia is in effect without self; she has no control over her circumstances and is reduced to an actor in male-authored plots.

Much of the power of Lydia’s writing comes from the fact that it is carried out in private; shielded from prying male eyes she is able to express herself without constraint.⁴ Concealed writing spaces like diaries could be tools of rebellion for women because they encouraged secrecy, and secrecy potentially fostered deceit and treachery. Novelistic representations of diaries are particularly concerned with how women’s personal writing spaces could promote immorality and rebellion. In Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Helen Huntington confesses disloyal feelings towards her husband Arthur to the diary she refers to as her “confidential friend”: first her disappointment, then her distrust, and finally her utter hatred (154). She also uses the diary to formulate a plot to leave the patriarchal institution of marriage and start a new life with her young son. Helena’s diary in Collins’s *Legacy of Cain* contains her selfish attempts to steal her sister’s sweetheart and her violent desire to kill both him and Eunice when she believes her plan has failed. In her clandestine confessional, the Victorian woman was free to express rebellious and violent thoughts and feelings that she could never voice publicly.

Women’s violence was closely associated with privacy in the Victorian period, hardly surprising given that the weapon of choice for the nineteenth-century murderess was also the most surreptitious. The majority of the high-profile female killers of the period, such as Madeleine Smith, Florence Maybrick, and Adelaide Bartlett used poison to kill their unsuspecting victims. Women’s reliance on poison is

to be expected since it is one of the few methods of homicide that does not require one to physically overpower one's victim. Unlike physical exertion, poison was a normal part of women's everyday lives. Toxic chemicals were chief ingredients in cosmetics, medicines, and household pesticides; French murderess Marie Lafarge claimed that the arsenic found in her house after her husband's death had been used to poison rats (Hartman 41). Most importantly, though, murder by poison could be carried out in secret; arsenic could be administered to victims in their food or drink, in small doses over several days or months, so that an individual could be dying without even being aware of it. This made women's use of poison particularly devious and horrific; the angel in the house could surreptitiously murder a member of her family via her role as domestic nurturer.⁵

Following the example of her real-life models, Lydia Gwilt favours poison as her murder weapon.⁶ In the back-story to the novel, Lydia has successfully poisoned one husband; during the course of the novel's action she attempts to murder another man by putting arsenic in his lemonade and gassing him with carbonic acid fumes in order to establish herself as his widow. Lydia's private writing functions in a similar way to her chemical poison; like the fumes she uses to asphyxiate Allan while he sleeps, Lydia's diary works insidiously against the novel's male characters, harming them without their knowledge. The diary is a repository for all Lydia's violent and unwomanly impulses; between its covers she gives voice to an aggression that she is forbidden to express in public. In her concealed narrative space, protected by lock and key, Lydia vents her unfeminine rage: "I could tear my own hair off my head! I could burn the house down! If there was a train of gunpowder under the whole world, I could light it, and blow the whole world to destruction!" (434). The privacy of the diary allows Lydia to write out her brutal fantasies unobserved and unchecked. After

overhearing Allan's marriage proposal to Neelie, she confesses, "If I could have killed them both at that moment by lifting up my little finger, I have not the least doubt I should have lifted it" (432).⁷ In and of themselves, these statements are not particularly threatening. However, conveying violent thoughts into violent words brings them one step closer to reality; it allows for the possibility that those words might translate into violent deeds. Although neither writing nor the administering of poison involves an outward display of physical aggression, Lydia's use of both illustrates how they can lead to deadly outcomes. By enabling violent activity, picking up the murderess's pen to write becomes akin to administering poison by a mere lifting of her finger.

Lydia attempts the translation from word to deed, using her diary for more than venting her anger. In its pages she coolly and deliberately concocts her brutal plots against Allan, representative of patriarchal order. In fact, Collins takes the connection between writing and treachery a step further by suggesting that Lydia's writing does not simply enable her criminality but that it is itself a criminal act. As Jane Blanchard's maid, twelve-year-old Lydia forges a letter which enables her mistress to marry Fergus Ingleby, alias Allan Armadale Sr. Lydia's life of crime begins with an act of writing and she goes on to use letters and diaries as key instruments in her later plots. Her writing enables her plotting to the extent that without the act of putting pen to paper it is unlikely any of her plans would come to fruition. For instance, the correspondence between Lydia and her elderly acquaintance Mother Oldershaw provides the catalyst for Lydia's plot to become Allan's wife. The scheme gains momentum as their correspondence continues, until Lydia finally exclaims, "I am in earnest at last. I mean to be Mrs Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose, and woe to the man or woman who tries to stop me!" (216). By making his murderess

conspire with another female writer, Collins draws particular attention to the danger that women's private writing poses to patriarchal authority.

As her plot becomes more sinister and violent, Lydia excludes Mother Oldershaw and retreats to the even more private space of her diary. Here she has complete freedom to take her plot to its inevitable conclusion. Through diary writing she finally realises how she can obtain Allan's fortune by exploiting the coincidence of Midwinter's real name, going on to outline the steps required to take her plan to completion:

In three bold steps – only three! – [the] end might be reached. Let Midwinter marry me privately, under his real name – step the first! Let Armadale leave Thorpe-Ambrose a single man, and die in some distant place among strangers – step the second!... Step the third, and last, is my appearance, after the announcement of Armadale's death has reached the neighbourhood, in the character of Armadale's widow, with my marriage certificate in my hand to prove my claim. (446)

The diary holds all the information Lydia needs to formulate her plan; she notes gleefully that the solution "has been in my Diary, for days past, without my knowing it!" (446). Like Doctor Downward's purple flask, the diary is a container for Lydia's violence, holding all the ingredients necessary to commit murder. Her writing is not simply an instance of identity construction; it is an active attempt at identity *reconstruction*, detailing her plan to transform herself from Miss Gwilt to Mrs Armadale, from poor governess to widow of a wealthy gentleman. Lydia engages in a process of violent rewriting that involves the erasure of patriarchal identities in order to secure her own.

3. Male Antidotes: Writing Over the Violent Woman

Paradoxically, the violent potential of Lydia's diary is undercut by the very medium that enables it. The diary contains Lydia's violence in two senses: it holds her rage and aggression, making it an especially volatile and threatening document; yet it also limits her violence by confining it to a private space. For the most part, the diary restrains the violence, as evidenced by the fact that Lydia's vengeful expressions are much more numerous than her aggressive actions. In addition, none of her plots against Allan are successful and her violence remains largely in her imagination, prevented by various coincidences (Allan's allergic reaction to brandy, for instance) from becoming a reality. To a large extent, then, the diary is able to restrict Lydia's violence, preventing it from entering the public realm. In spite of the radical potential of Lydia's writing, Collins prevents it from taking its poisonous effect, thus reinforcing women's incapacity as writers and plotters.

In Collins's fiction, the ineffectiveness of women's writing is decisively contrasted with the power and efficiency of male narratives. In *The Woman in White*, for instance, Marian relates a substantial portion of the narrative in her diary, keeping track of Sir Percival's abusive treatment of Laura and documenting her attempts to undermine him. As in her role as Laura's protector, however, Marian the narrator is an inferior substitute for Walter. Along with Marian's other activity, the diary ceases abruptly when its writer is consumed by illness and she must relinquish narrative authority back to the novel's male characters. The writing in her last entry trails off and becomes illegible; it is followed by "a man's handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular" as Fosco appropriates her private narrative. Marian renounces her writing to a more effective male author who possesses the firmness she lacks to successfully

take a task to completion. Collins makes it clear that, in the battle for narrative control, men will always win.⁸

Ozias Midwinter plays a similar role in *Armada*; specifically, he functions as an antidote to Lydia's poisonous writing. Midwinter's narrative is one of a malign but transcendent Fate; thus, however determinedly Lydia fights for control of her plot, Midwinter's will always be more powerful.⁹ As soon as he shares his father's narrative with Lydia it begins to disrupt hers; the story "haunt[s]" her and she writes of needing time "to compose myself, and to coax my mind back (if I can) to my own affairs" (424). Midwinter's narrative proves an effective weapon against Lydia's plotting; it acts as a kind of counter-poison, violently infiltrating Lydia's system. She tells her diary that she feels "as if his story had taken possession of me, never to leave me again" and explains how "my usual readiness in emergencies has deserted me.... [M]y mind feels quite stupefied" (424; 433). The power of Midwinter's narrative puts her into a kind of trance, rendering her passive and incapable of action.

Like Fosco before him, Midwinter penetrates the private space of the woman's diary, though indirectly. In fact, Lydia begins her diary in response to the poisonous effect of his narrative; that Lydia's writing is essentially dictated by Midwinter reduces her authority from the diary's very conception. In order to regain control of herself after Midwinter relates the story behind his real name, she picks up her pen and tries to write: "Would it help me to shake off these impressions, I wonder, if I made the effort of writing them down?... [T]he experiment is worth trying. In my present situation I *must* be free to think of other things, or I shall never be able to find my way through all the difficulties at Thorpe-Ambrose that are still to come" (424; Collins's emphasis). In the violent struggle for narrative supremacy that ensues, the act of writing becomes central to the assertion of narrative control. Midwinter's

narrative is given authority through repeated telling and transcribing. First told by Midwinter's father and transcribed by Mr Neal, it is reinforced by Allan's dream narrative which Midwinter himself takes down in writing. In the same way, committing her narrative to paper is an attempt to reinforce Lydia's plotline in the face of a competing alternative. However, Lydia's experiment proves a complete failure; she declares, "I hate writing! It doesn't relieve me – it makes me worse. I'm farther from being able to think of all that I *must* think of, than I was when I sat down" (426; Collins's emphasis). Ironically, the diarist's writing works against her, robbing her of her self-possession and her ability to perform her acts of violence.

In emphasising the disabling effect of Lydia's writing, Collins conforms to conventional views about diary writing as a medium for women's self-improvement. As a descendent of the religious diaries of conscience, the secular diary was sanctioned as serving a moral purpose. The female author of *My Daughter's Manual*, a conduct book written for women in 1837, recommended that diarists keep track of both their pleasure and pain, defining the diary as "a kind of second conscience, permanently recording the dictates of our internal monitor" (259). Collins utilises the diary as moral record-keeper in *The Legacy of Cain* where sisters Eunice and Helena are given diaries by their father who views the practice of private writing as "a good moral discipline for young girls" (67). By containing women's expression in a private space, diaries reinforced the conventional association of women with domesticity, moral superiority and silence. Although Collins allows many of his heroines to narrate their own experiences, the fact that he so often chooses to present their narratives within appropriately "feminine" literary spaces suggests an attempt to contain the power associated with women's self-representation.

In accordance with traditional diary-writing practices, Lydia's journal functions as a conscience that forces her to reconsider her evil schemes. The second self enabled by the diary has the contradictory effects of empowering Lydia to act against her pre-written narrative and hindering her rebellious, autonomous action. Rereading the narrative of her violent, plotting self deters her from her murderous plans. Under the weight of her burgeoning guilt, writing out her murder plot becomes detestable to her: "I shall sink" she exclaims, "if I write or think of it any more!" (448). Like Marian, Lydia is hindered by her feminine weakness; her love for Midwinter and her presentiment that her actions might result in him sacrificing himself to save his friend cause her to abandon her plot, if only temporarily. "It is horrible!" she exclaims when thinking of the possibility of Midwinter coming to harm, "it is impossible! it shall never be!" As she thinks about it her hand, holding the pen with which she constructs her plot, "trembles" while her "heart sinks." Ultimately, Lydia's writing interferes with her plotting by forcing her to acknowledge both the wickedness of her actions as a human being and the inappropriateness of her actions as a woman.

When Lydia renounces her plot to kill Allan for the first time, she also stops writing, allowing Midwinter to write over her. Their marriage is in many ways a legal manifestation of her containment within his narrative. In order to reinforce this overwriting process, Collins has Midwinter take up writing as a profession; when he becomes a newspaper correspondent in Naples his writing literally begins to compete with his wife's. Ironically, Midwinter's writing is directly responsible for a resurgence of Lydia's; she reopens her diary because she feels isolated from her husband who spends all his time working. Lydia begins the second instalment of her diary by explaining the reason for her return to writing:

Why have I broken my resolution? Why have I gone back to this secret friend of my wretchedest and wickedest hours? Because I am more friendless than ever; because I am more lonely than ever, though my husband is sitting writing in the next room to me.... I am losing the love he once felt for me.... Day after day, the hours that he gives to his hateful writing grow longer and longer; day after day, he becomes more and more silent, in the hours that he gives to Me. (545)

Lydia's capitalising of the first-person pronoun suggests a need to reassert her identity as separate from her husband's. Reopening the diary is equivalent to restarting her murder plot against Allan and by the time she closes it for the final time she has resolved to carry out her violent plan. Initially at least, Midwinter's writing has the unexpected effect of reinforcing his wife's plotline.

However, although Midwinter restarts Lydia's murderous plot he is also responsible for ensuring that it is never taken to completion. He occupies Lydia's thoughts and the pages of her diary as she plans her murders to the extent that she is rendered completely incapable of action. In addition, Collins supplies Midwinter with male reinforcements who ensure that Lydia's grasp on her plot becomes more and more tenuous. With each of her three successive attempts on Allan's life, Lydia's role decreases while the involvement of male characters intensifies. The first plot – the addition of arsenic to Allan's lemonade – is both planned and carried out by Lydia alone, although her reluctance to write of this attempt in her diary already suggests her inability to cope with such a high level of active involvement. For the second attempt she enlists the help of her ex-lover Manuel. In a reversal of Waldron's murder, Manuel acts as Lydia's "instrument", endeavouring to dispose of Allan at sea while Lydia stays on shore (569). However, this ultimately has the same effect of

distancing Lydia from the act of violence; the official story of the wreck of the *Dorothea* printed in the newspaper makes no mention of Lydia's involvement and Allan's letter to Mr Bashwood on his rescue lays all the blame on Manuel and his crew of "murderous vagabonds" (601).

For the third and last attempt, Collins engages in a threefold eradication of his murderess's authority. The final section of the novel (Book the Last) constitutes an overzealous attempt to place plot control squarely in the hands of patriarchal males. For the somewhat implausible and simplistic reason that there are no more blank pages left in her diary, Lydia finally relinquishes narrative control to the male omniscient narrator who relates the murder attempt and the final days of Lydia's life. When she closes her diary for the last time she in effect bids farewell to her plotting self. She writes in her diary, "I half suspect myself of having been unreasonably fond of *you*"; "you" here refers not simply to the diary but to the autonomous self the diary has come to personify. By addressing her diarised self in the second person and her post-diary self in the first person (the final line of the diary reads, "What a fool I am!") she disowns her plotting self and identifies with the passive character constructed by the omniscient narrator, finally accepting the role of the Woman-Shadow whose part she will play for the remainder of her short life (611; Collins's emphasis).

Lydia has been reduced to a pawn, pulled between Doctor Downward's plot to take Allan's life and Midwinter's counterplot to preserve it. The closing of her diary coincides with the final relinquishing of her plot to Downward, an otherwise completely superfluous character who is reintroduced for the express purpose of appropriating Lydia's plan to murder Allan for financial gain. In the male-controlled space of Downward's Sanatorium, Lydia dissolves into a "ghost" of her former self, a

shadow who does not speak and disguises her identity behind a veil (633). Downward skilfully manipulates the situation so that, in the event of a murder investigation, Lydia will appear culpable, although it is clear that he is controlling events every step of the way. He fills the purple flask and puts it in the fumigation apparatus, all the while making it appear as though he has run out of the necessary poison to kill Allan. Even Lydia recognises that she is no longer in control of the plot, a fact Jonathan Tutor interprets as evidence of her madness: “Her grip on reality,” Tutor writes, “becomes so weak that she blames Downward for the plot and relegates herself to an auxiliary role” (44). However, when Lydia says that “[t]he doctor will kill [Allan], by my hands” she speaks a rational truth (640). Lydia no longer possesses any authorial control and is reduced to a powerless actor in Downward’s plot.

Although he catalyses her return to violence, Midwinter’s disabling effect on Lydia increases the closer she comes to performing murder. When she betrays her sacred duty by leaving her husband in order to establish herself as Allan’s widow, the extent of Midwinter’s indignation overwhelms her and her self-possession crumbles. Pointing at the widow’s weeds she has donned in “mourning” for Allan, supposedly drowned at sea, he demands an explanation. The narrator describes Lydia’s paralysis as follows: “At the sound of his voice, the quick rise and fall of her bosom – which had been the one outward betrayal thus far of the inner agony that tortured her – suddenly stopped. She stood impenetrably silent, breathlessly still – as if his questions had struck her dead, and his pointing hand had petrified her”. Lydia musters all her strength and denies her husband to his face, but the action drains her of all her power and when she finishes speaking “the last faint vestige of colour in her cheeks fade[s] out” (626). Midwinter contains Lydia’s power; the legal dominance he is entitled to as her husband is paralleled by the psychological control he unwittingly has over her.

When he finally recognises Lydia's true character he vocalises his authority, saying, "[s]he has denied her husband to-night.... She shall know her master to-morrow" (630). In the end, this ultimatum comes true, although it requires little effort on Midwinter's part. While he does not assert his dominance using violence or force, he does accompany Allan to the Sanatorium where his presence alone continues to rob Lydia of her resolve. Without ever seeing or talking to her, Midwinter occupies her mind and interferes with her plotting through an almost osmotic process. As she stands outside Allan's door preparing to pour the first measure from the purple flask, she is delayed by thoughts of her husband: "For the last time, the resolution that had come over her in the earlier night, with the knowledge that her husband was in the house, forced itself uppermost in her mind. For the last time, the voice within her said, 'Think if there is no other way!'" (661). Her certainty that Midwinter will not expose her to public scandal by revealing her deeds enables her to begin the process of poisoning Allan. Yet even as she pours the liquid from the flask, Midwinter continues to unwittingly affect her self-control; her hand "tremble[s] violently" as she imagines him leaving his room and discovering her in the middle of her crime (663).

The draining of Lydia's authority is accompanied by a definitive assertion of her femininity; as with her first resolution to close her diary, it is predominantly her love for her husband that interferes with her ability to plot. Collins repeats the same image of Lydia's affection for Midwinter twice within the last Book in order to reinforce Lydia's abandonment of her violent, masculine self in favour of her nurturing, feminine self. After Lydia has denied him as her husband, Midwinter collapses in shock and Lydia experiences a surge of feminine feeling that is highly physical and specifically divorced from language:

With both arms clasped round him, the miserable woman lifted his face to hers, and rocked him on her bosom in an agony of tenderness beyond all relief in tears, in a passion of remorse beyond all expression in words. In silence she held him to her breast, in silence she devoured his forehead, his cheeks, his lips, with kisses. Not a sound escaped her.... (628)

Later, in the Sanatorium, Lydia once more holds Midwinter in her arms after she realises she has inadvertently been poisoning him instead of Allan; she instantly forgets her murderous intent and is concerned only with her husband's wellbeing. Although she performs the heroic feat of dragging Midwinter to safety, this burst of activity is explicitly feminised and hence is Lydia's first (and only) acceptable display of agency. The feminine "instinct" of a woman in love "rush[es] into action" before her masculine "reason" can re-exert itself. While her murder plot is plagued by doubt and confusion, her selfless rescue of Midwinter is performed "without a moment's hesitation" (664). Collins stresses her reawakened femininity when she realises her husband is alive: "There was something softly radiant in her eyes, which lit her whole countenance as with an inner light, and made her womanly and lovely once more" (665). Lydia has finally chosen a patriarchally scripted plot over her own, autonomously generated narrative, a sacrifice which amounts to a complete renunciation of power and authority.

Collins's refeminisation of Lydia can be viewed as an attempt to neutralise the threat of the violent woman. Yet rewriting the murderess from active conspirator to repentant wife is insufficient and she must be entirely written out of the narrative. Lydia's final action is to shut herself in the room intended to be Allan's death-chamber and allow the poison to take her own life instead. The suicide has been interpreted as a reassertion of her plot control; Pal-Lapinski calls it a "final exhibition

of agency” and a “tragic gesture of defiance” that enables Lydia to evade punishment by the legal system (118). However, the selfless motivations for Lydia’s suicide endorse rather than subvert conventional Victorian associations of women with passivity and capitulation. Margaret Higonnet notes the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feminisation of suicide and outlines the shift from a view of suicide as an act of heroic martyrdom to an association with mental anguish and helplessness (105). Collins’s own opinion of suicide seems to have shared in this popular belief. In *The Legacy of Cain* the prison governor, who is also one of the narrators, explains why the hardened poisoner Helena did not kill herself: “[N]o thoroughly wicked creature ever yet committed suicide. Self-destruction, when it is not an act of madness, implies some acuteness of feeling—sensibility to remorse or to shame, or perhaps a distorted idea of making atonement” (461-62). Collins’s contemporaries recognised the compensatory nature of Lydia’s suicide. Forster wrote to Collins of the “pity and pathos” of the ending; he regarded the compassion aroused in the reader for an otherwise completely unsympathetic character as “the finest thing in the book” (Collins, *Letters* 276).

For most Victorian readers, Lydia’s suicide would have been a much more understandable and forgivable action than her murder attempts. Thwarted or lost love was a commonly ascribed motive for women’s suicide in nineteenth-century fictional and medical literature and it is telling that Collins chooses to emphasise Lydia’s rekindled affection for Midwinter in the moments leading up to her death. In their study of women’s criminality, Lombroso and Ferrero argued that “the passionate woman flies to suicide as a relief to the disillusionments and the pangs of love” and that suicide was a much more natural outcome of women’s passion than homicide or other violent acts: “The true crime of love...in a woman is suicide; all her other crimes of

passion are of a hybrid sort” (273; 276). While Lydia’s “hybrid” attempts at violence against others are prolonged and largely unsuccessful, her “true” violence against her own body is brief and decisive. After the repeated failures of her plots to kill a patriarchal male, Lydia’s suicide, performed spontaneously out of guilt over her past actions and fear of causing her husband harm by her future ones, ends in success. The gradual dissolving of Lydia’s identity has its logical outcome in the complete erasure of that identity; Lydia sacrifices her self and is reduced to a memory.

4. Conclusion

For Lydia, at least, self-representation proves a futile task; as soon as she sets herself down on paper she is overwritten by a male perspective. The novel ends with a decisive and triumphal reassertion of the male voice at the expense of the silenced female. Correspondence between Pedgifts Senior and Junior, proponents of a masculinist legal discourse, describes the situation after Allan and Midwinter leave the Sanatorium. Every trace of the murderess’s identity is eradicated; Midwinter and Allan are the only people at her funeral and her tombstone is unmarked except for “the initial letter of her Christian name, and the date of her death”. Lydia is posthumously recast as a victim of male plotting. Just as the murder of Waldron was blamed on Manuel, Lydia’s criminal culpability is surpassed by Doctor Downward’s; although there is no evidence against the doctor, Pedgift Senior believes him to be “at the bottom of more of this mischief than we shall ever find out” (672). Even Lydia’s more acceptable act of agency, her suicide, is erased and apoplexy is recorded as the official cause of her death.

In a chivalrous attempt to preserve Lydia’s honour, Midwinter and Allan keep the details of her intrigues secret and her plotting never becomes public, remaining

within the private space of her diary and hence forming part of the erasure of her identity. However, in Collins's fiction the publicity of murderesses' diaries has the same effect of containing their authors. For the violent heroines who do not commit suicide, Collins uses the diary as a means of ensuring they are punished for their crimes. In *Man and Wife*, Hester Dethridge's detailed Confession of the murder of her abusive husband, to be made public on her death, prematurely ends up in the hands of Geoffrey Delamayn who uses it to blackmail her into helping him kill his own wife by the same method. Although Helena Gracedieu writes more "guardedly" than Hester, her diary provides enough evidence to effect her arrest for the poisoning of Philip Dunboyne (460). In these cases, the murderess's confession has the same containing function as Lydia's suicide; by facilitating her incarceration within the institutions of prison and the asylum, the publicising of the murderess's writing prevents her from committing further violence.¹⁰ Whether public or private, Collins suggests, the murderess's writing will always work against her; although she is given temporary rights of self-representation she must eventually forfeit her authority and be absorbed back into patriarchal narratives.

In *Armada*, the erasure of women's writing is accompanied by a reinforcement of male writing in Midwinter's plan to "take to Literature" (676). Midwinter will follow in his creator's footsteps, asserting male artfulness and authority by penning works of fiction. The ultimate outcome of *Armada* is that male writing, from Collins's authorship to Midwinter's journalism and novelistic ambitions, is legitimated while female writing is denied. Critics joined forces with Collins's male characters to erase Lydia's writing after the novel was published. The *Spectator* questioned Collins's claim in the preface to *Armada* that it is a novel "daring enough to speak the truth", asking, "Is it true that...hags and intriguers

exchange cynical letters sparkling with the epigram of a practiced writer, and...murderesses keep journals of equal literary merit and equal power of mental anatomy?" However, although Collins was criticised for his unrealistic depictions of female characters, his own status as an author was not challenged; in fact, while Lydia's writing was dismissed as implausible, her creator was celebrated for the "easy style and allusive sparkle" of his prose, ironic given that both Collins's and Lydia's writing ultimately issued from the same pen (*Spectator* 9 Jun. 1866). The creation of an artificial discrepancy between the writing of author and character on the basis of gender highlights the entrenched nineteenth-century belief that womanhood and authorship were incommensurable. In the same way that violence was considered to be an almost exclusively male activity, writing was ideologically off limits for Victorian women.

Chapter Three

Authenticity and Artificiality: Performing Femininity in Victorian Women's

Sensational Writing

For the Victorian murderess, a pen could be as effective at spreading violence as a vial of poison. Collins's decision to so thoroughly erase Lydia Gwilt's narrative indicates the powerful potential of women's writing. Violent writing like Lydia's was dangerous in its authenticity; her very real desire to kill is reinforced by the act of writing down. Yet Lydia's writing was also condemned for its artificiality, as indicated by critics' responses to the novel; as a writer, at least, Lydia was deemed unbelievable. This denial of Lydia's plausibility functions in the same way as Collins's containment of her violence; by denying the existence of women like Lydia, the threat they posed was effectively dispelled. Mary Braddon's fictional murderess Lady Audley was also declared implausible, with reviewers uniting in their pronouncement that the demon in angel's clothing could never exist. Margaret Oliphant called her "a piece of imposture" while W. Fraser Rae emphatically declared "a woman cannot fill such a part" (Oliphant 263; Rae 96). Such reactions illustrate the complex relationship between artificiality and authenticity inherent in representations of the murderess. Lynn Voskuil argues that the Victorians ascribed two contradictory meanings to authenticity, defining it as both "the tangible, empirically verifiable real thing and as an ideal, immaterial quality" (611). Lady Audley was authentic in the sense that women like her really did exist; although Braddon's heroine represents the extremes of the good woman–bad woman spectrum, every domestic murderess to a certain extent simultaneously occupied the positions of angel and demon. At the same time, Lady Audley was deemed inauthentic because contemporary readers found it

implausible that a woman could act so incongruously; such a woman did not conform to the feminine ideal so she was literally absent from ideology.

In drawing attention to the contradictory significations of authenticity, nineteenth-century critics' reactions to Lady Audley illustrate the performative nature of her identity. In particular, Rae's comment above reveals "[an] awareness that, like actresses, real women assume roles" (Voskuil 615). According to Rae, Lady Audley plays the role of a "female Mephistopheles", "a Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed"; in other words, her behaviour does not conform to the tenets of "natural" femininity and is, therefore, impossible.¹ Rae makes a distinction between natural or authentic femininity, characterised by timidity and gentleness, and the inauthentic performance of calculated violence carried out by Lady Audley; her violent behaviour goes against the natural laws of femininity and hence must be an act. However, although not recognised by Rae, his comments about the parts that women could and could not fill imply that angelic femininity is equally a performance. Rather than being an essential, natural state of being that is synonymous with the Victorian woman, "angel in the house" is itself a social construction, a role that the Victorian woman assumes in the same way that she can play the part of demonic murderess.

Many critics today reverse the logic of Victorian reviewers, arguing that Lady Audley's wickedness is indicative of her authentic identity while angel in the house is simply a false part she assumes to disguise her true nature. Morris writes how Braddon "makes clear that appearance and reality are not the same, that corruption can flourish beneath a respectable façade"; Lyn Pykett argues that Dr Mosgrave pronounces Lady Audley "dangerous" because "she is not what she appears to be" and refers to Clara as "the true embodiment of the domestic ideal which Lady Audley merely impersonates"; similarly, Anthea Trodd believes that the novel "presents

domestic femininity as an impersonation which is inevitably the product of guile and deception” (Morris 99; Pykett 94, 104; Trodd 106). Yet, as Morrissey’s study of the murderess’s performativity, discussed in Chapter One, shows, the roles that the violent woman plays are not entirely inauthentic either; that is to say, they are not simply false or feigned identities that the murderess assumes to disguise her true self. Morrissey argues that performative identities are “narratives of subjectivity”, meaning that “the narratives one tells and those told about one are integral factors in the production of subjectivity” (7). Thus, in performing the angel’s narrative, whether that narrative is autonomously chosen by the woman or imposed on her by society, the Victorian woman becomes the angel, developing not simply the outward manifestation but the internally constructed identity of the angel as well. As a result, none of the roles the murderess plays are any more or less “natural” or “authentic” than the others; in taking on a narrative, the murderess takes on the corresponding subjectivity. Indeed, *Lady Audley’s Secret* illustrates the equally performative nature of the two supposedly diametrically opposite roles; the heroine possesses the subjectivities of both angel and demon, switching between roles as her circumstances alter.

This ability to perform multiple roles enabled the Victorian murderess to play out multiple narratives: the narratives, to borrow Pykett’s distinction, of “proper femininity” – loyal wife, loving mother, dutiful daughter – and the narratives of “improper femininity” – murderess, whore, and otherwise transgressive or rebellious woman. Specifically, it allowed women to have secret lives; for a public audience they acted according to the script written for them by Victorian society, while in private they could live another, less acceptable life that they scripted themselves. However, if these alternative narratives became public, they were invariably written

over and the transgressive woman was cast back into her proper role. Victorian beliefs about natural femininity, as illustrated by the comments of contemporaneous critics, informed reactions to women who stepped outside its bounds by engaging in deviant, inappropriate or violent behaviour. These women were foregrounded in the cultural imagination and were subjected to intense public scrutiny. However, much like Collins's treatment of Lydia Gwilt, the widespread acknowledgement of their existence was accompanied by strenuous attempts to deny that existence by erasing or explaining away their transgressions. Just as Lydia and Lady Audley were emphatically decreed impossible, real-life murderesses were subject to similar denials of their realism. Legal, media and medical discourses were constantly reducing women's culpability for their own violence, casting convicted murderesses as madwomen or as the helpless victims of wicked male influences. When Adelaide Bartlett went to trial for murdering her husband Edwin in 1886, there was no doubt that she had administered the poison that killed him; however, responsibility for Adelaide's action was transferred to Edwin who was accused of corrupting his wife and bringing about his own death.² Madeleine Smith, whose story is the subject of the first section of this chapter, was likewise recast as the victim of a corrupting man, in this case her fiancé Emile L'Angelier. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Madeleine received a Not Proven verdict on the grounds that Emile's own wickedness had caused his lover to break the rules of natural femininity. With this verdict, another woman was successfully distanced from the role of plotting murderess, reinforcing the supposed authenticity of the angelic ideal.

1. “Most corrupting influence”: The Madeleine Smith Affair

We find, in short, throughout the correspondence unmistakable traces of a mature viciousness – acting with overwhelming force upon female weakness and inexperience.

– *Daily Express*, reporting on the

Madeleine Smith trial (10 July 1857)

In 1857, twenty-one-year-old Scotswoman Madeleine Smith was tried for the murder of her secret fiancé and lover, Frenchman Emile L’Angelier. Madeleine, daughter of a wealthy Glaswegian architect’s family, and Emile, a shipping clerk in a trading firm, were involved in an illicit sexual relationship which began early in 1855 and lasted until Madeleine’s engagement to wealthy merchant William Minnoch in January 1857. Betrayed by the woman who had promised to be his wife, Emile threatened to show the sexually explicit love letters Madeleine had written him to her father. Madeleine begged for the return of her letters but Emile refused. On 23 March 1857, Emile died suddenly after drinking cocoa Madeleine had prepared; an autopsy revealed arsenic poisoning.³

As a living example of a domestic murderess, Madeleine represented the reality of Victorian women’s violence. The widespread media coverage of her trial made her impossible to ignore; it was difficult to deny that a woman was capable of such deviance and treachery when there was so much evidence of Madeleine’s culpability. Her prolific correspondence with Emile as well as the testimonies of numerous witnesses, including a maid who acted as go-between for the couple, confirmed both the affair and Madeleine’s motive for killing Emile. Yet in spite of the certainty of Madeleine’s guilt, the defence’s attempt to suggest the implausibility of her behaviour was largely successful. Utilising contemporary gender ideologies, it

was argued that a young lady was incapable of performing such acts unless corrupted by a male influence. Emile was portrayed as a vile foreigner who seduced Madeleine and tried to force her to marry him to improve his social status. The sexual content of her letters was blamed on Emile, with Counsel for the defence asking, “Think you that, without temptation, without evil teaching, a poor girl falls into such depths of degradation? No. Influence from without – most corrupting influence – can alone account for such a fall” (qtd. in Helfield 167). Emile was deemed responsible not only for leading Madeleine astray but for indirectly penning her letters. The *Daily Express* was absolute in its explanation of the correspondence: “No woman would have ever written such letters had she not been encouraged and incited to do so, and had they not been in reply to others worse still” (2). In spite of the fact that almost all of Emile’s letters to Madeleine had been destroyed, for many people it was easier to believe in a man’s depravity where no proof existed than it was to accept the blatant evidence of a woman’s sexual enjoyment.

Madeleine’s lawyers recognised that to prove their client’s innocence they had to completely eliminate her authority and recast her from perpetrator to victim. In addition to arguing that Emile was to blame for Madeleine’s fall into sin, the defence also claimed that he had brought about his own death, accusing him of turning Madeleine into a murderess through his depraved influence. Incredible as such an argument seems, the jury was persuaded by it enough to declare a verdict of Not Proven, a ruling unique to Scotland meaning that there was insufficient evidence for a conviction. Given her obvious motive and the recent universal consensus among historians that Madeleine almost certainly poisoned Emile, it seems likely that the jury was heavily swayed by contemporary beliefs about what a woman was and was not capable of doing. As Mary Hartman writes,

[T]here was more than sufficient evidence to show that...[Madeleine] had neither been [a] dupe nor [an] innocent and that many of [her] actions were both self-conscious and calculated. Most organs of public opinion ignored this, however, since young women, respectable ones at least, were by definition not responsible. Gentlemen were taught, after all, that nothing was a young lady's fault and, although the notion may have stripped women of human identity, they could find it useful in times of trouble. (56)

The ingrained Victorian belief that women were incapable of filling the part that Madeleine was accused of playing worked in Madeleine's favour, as it did for many other female criminals during this period. Like the fictional Lydia Gwilt, real-life murderesses were reduced to characters in men's narratives. Emile himself was unwilling to believe his lover could have control of the outcome of their relationship; when she told him she had to call off their engagement because her father objected, he wrote to her, saying, "I cannot put it into my mind that yet you are at the bottom of all this" (56).⁴ Emile could not ignore the fact that his lover was deceitful; the furtive nature of their relationship necessitated that. However, he was reluctant to face the possibility that Madeleine's ruse might also involve fabricating her intention to marry him.

Yet Madeleine did have authority over her situation, writing two parallel narratives for herself and changing her performance depending on her audience. For her parents, friends and wider society, Madeleine performed the conventional part of chaste and submissive daughter who later became the fiancée of a reputable businessman; for Emile she was the secretive, sexualised woman who had promised herself to him alone. Madeleine constructed a role for herself as Emile's wife,

although she was not legally married. In her letters she regularly addressed Emile as “my own darling husband” and “my ever beloved husband” and signed as “thy ever fond wife, thy Mimi L’Angelier”. Constructing herself as Emile’s wife became especially important when the couple had their first sexual encounter in the summer of 1856. Writing the following day, Madeleine asked Emile, “Am I not your wife? Yes I am. And you may rest assured after what has passed I cannot be the wife of any other but dear, dear Emile” (71). When Minnoch proposed, however, Madeleine rewrote herself as his fiancée, endeavouring to erase the narrative of her relationship with Emile by asking him to return her letters so she could destroy them:

I trust to your honour as a Gentleman that you will not reveal anything that may have passed between us. I shall feel obliged by your bringing me my letters and Likeness on Thursday evening at 7. Be at the Area Gate, and C.H. [Christina, her maid] will [take] the parcel from you. On Friday night I shall send you all your letters, Likeness, etc. (104)

In writing over her relationship with Emile, Madeleine attempted a complete reconstruction of her identity from fallen woman to conventional wife. However, Madeleine’s re-presentation was prevented by Emile’s reluctance to be written out of her script. Shortly after Emile refused to return her correspondence, Madeleine poisoned him, a violent attempt to permanently erase her affair narrative and rewrite her self.

Madeleine used writing as a means of rebelling against Victorian convention and authoring her own life. In her private correspondence she wrote against the social script that she was expected to conform to, plotting an illicit affair with a man of inferior standing. Rather than conniving manipulator of a helpless woman, the letters depict Emile as a mere actor in a relationship authored by his lover. Madeleine

controlled the relationship from the outset, organising the couples' early meetings. As Peter Hunt writes, "[t]he first move was always hers: she set the pace and wove the pattern.... [Emile] was the one that had to wait each day for instructions" (43). In her second letter to Emile, dated 3 April, 1855, she gives her lover his orders:

We [Madeleine and her sister Bessie] are to be in town tomorrow.... We are to call at our old quarters in the Square [at] about quarter past 12 o'clock. So if you could be in Mr. M'Call's Lodgings, see us come out of Mrs. Ramsay's, come after us [and] say you are astonished to see us in Town without letting you know.... (49)

Madeleine also arranged for Emile to come to her house when her family was away, meeting him at the back gate and occasionally taking him into the laundry. She exercised her influence over him by dissuading him from accepting a chance to improve his prospects in Peru, threatening him with a permanent parting from her if he went: "If you go then I know I shall never see you more. I may bid you farewell forever.... Oh dearest of my soul, could you not do Europe? I would leave all and go with you. I love you so" (52). Emile obeyed his lover and did not go on the trip.

Besides enabling their physical meetings, the correspondence actually constituted a large part of the affair itself. Because the clandestine nature of their relationship prevented them from regularly meeting face-to-face, the majority of their affair took place on paper. The most sensational aspect of Madeleine's writing was its candid sexual content; Madeleine's references to her sexual encounters with Emile are euphemistic but unambiguous. She writes of their "intimacy" and the act of "tak[ing] [Emile] into [her] room" (68; 80). Intercourse is referred to as "love" underlined, as in "I long to be your wife, then there will be no danger we may love each other" and "It was a punishment to myself to be deprived of your loving me, for it is a pleasure, no

one can deny that” (81; 82). As their opportunities for physical intimacy were limited, their correspondence became a site of sexual enactment; Madeleine boldly admits “I grow excited while I write you” (81). Just as Lydia Gwilt’s private writing fuels her violent rages, Madeleine’s letters encouraged illicit sexual behaviour in an otherwise respectable Victorian woman.

Yet, while Madeleine’s letters enabled her affair, as soon as they became public documents they began to work against her. In fact, the fear of her writing going public was motive enough for her to murder her lover; ironically, this very attempt to keep her writing private resulted in its widespread and sensational entrance into legal and media discourses. Randa Helfield argues that “[b]ecause Madeleine never took the stand, one could say that it was rather her letters that stood trial. It was as a writer that she was ultimately judged. Indeed, her letters were critiqued as mercilessly as any other piece of sensation literature” (163). Madeleine’s writing was seen as evidence of her sexual depravity and, for respectable English society in the nineteenth century, female sexuality and violence were inextricably linked. The implication was that a woman who was not innocent in the sexual sense was unlikely to be innocent in the criminal sense and, as Lucia Zedner notes, “assessments of sexual conduct were used to measure the depth of [women’s] criminality” (32). Madeleine’s criminal guilt was thus reinforced by the highly sexual nature of her writing; in fact, much of the letters’ sexual material was not permitted as evidence at the trial or was severely censored because it was considered too pornographic. The Judge declared that the letters “show[ed] as extraordinary a frame of mind and as unhallowed a passion as perhaps ever appeared in a Court of Justice” (qtd. in Helfield 164). Like the sensation novels of the following decade, the content of Madeleine’s letters was considered proof of

moral contamination in the author which made any form of inappropriate behaviour highly likely (Helfield 165).

Further, the act of writing itself betrays the ability to artfully construct and shape events and artfulness was incompatible with Victorian notions of innocence and of femininity (Helfield 166). However, Emile's supposed tutelage of Madeleine's writing weakened her association with artfulness as ultimately she was not seen as the author of her own writing. Female novelists writing in the public realm had no one to take responsibility for their work; as possessors of authorial control culpability rested squarely on their shoulders. Women's writing was judged by different criteria than men's, as illustrated by the decision of many mid-nineteenth-century female authors to write under male pseudonyms. Elaine Showalter identifies the use of the pseudonym with the growth of novel writing as a profession; it was an indication that female authors at mid century "saw the will to write as a vocation in direct conflict with their status as women". Writing was a man's profession and many female authors felt the need to adopt a masculine persona in order to "participate in the mainstream of literary culture" (*Literature of Their Own* 19). One such novelist, Anne Brontë, writing under the pseudonym Acton Bell, questioned "why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man" (5). More than anything else, women were censured for representing sexually explicit or otherwise indecent material, in other words the staples of sensation fiction. As Pykett notes, "what women could say in fiction, and how their voices were likely to be heard, were constrained by both the prevailing discourses on woman, and a gendered discourse on fiction" (22). She argues that women's sensation novels were most severely criticised because of their entrance into the "transgressive domain of the improper feminine" in the depiction of immoral female behaviour. While their male

counterparts were condemned for their representations of women, female sensation writers were attacked twice over, for their scandalous heroines and for the act of writing itself. Women were not supposed to know about the sensational aspects of life, let alone to write them down, and their credibility as authors was constantly called into question.

2. Mary Braddon as Sensation Writer

...an author of real power, who is capable of better things than drawing highly-coloured portraits of beautiful fiends and fast young ladies burdened with superfluous husbands.

– Henry Mansel describing Mary Braddon (491)

Mary Elizabeth Braddon made a living from her sensational plots and repeatedly painted portraits of deviant women in her novels. As the most successful and prolific female sensation writer, Braddon was often singled out as scapegoat for the general impropriety of women's writing. Although all sensation authors were accused of disseminating poison, Braddon was cast as the apothecary who concocted the recipe: "If the first object of the novelist be to excite a morbid curiosity," a reviewer of her novel *Run to Earth* wrote, "if blood and poisoning and intrigue, the most hateful passions, the vilest actions, form the best ingredients of fiction, then...no one has mixed them together more skilfully than Miss Braddon" ("Run to Earth"). While Collins was typically regarded as the father of sensation, Braddon soon took on the role of the genre's witch-mother, brewing the deadly ingredients that would corrupt a whole nation of defenceless young women. Braddon was particularly vulnerable to criticism as she did not take on a male pseudonym; the conspicuousness of her sex challenged the notion that women could not occupy the role of professional writer.

The sheer volume and success of novels and short stories written by Braddon in the second half of the nineteenth century cemented her status as “the leader of her school” (Oliphant 265). Braddon’s literary poison was far reaching; her most famous novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* was reportedly one of the three most popular books of 1862 and was reprinted eight times within three months (Blodgett, “The Greying” 132; Tromp et al. xxii). The eighty-plus novels penned by Braddon were widely distributed in the circulating libraries and were eagerly consumed by readers of all social strata; as Rae regretfully commented, Braddon was responsible for “making the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room”(qtd. in Wolff, *Sensational Victorian* 196-97). The popularity of Braddon’s work ensured its reproduction throughout the Victorian period; her novels were regularly adapted into stage plays, including C. H. Hazlewood’s and George Roberts’s productions of *Lady Audley* in 1863, and at least four adaptations of *Aurora Floyd* that appeared on London stages immediately after the novel’s release (Tromp et al. xvii). Due to its prolific repetition, it was almost impossible to escape the influence of Braddon’s sensational literature.

Like the diarists and letter writers they created, female sensation novelists were condemned for both the authenticity and the artificiality of their representations. Critics complained that the genre’s heroines were implausible; E. S. Dallas protested that, because a woman’s life “cannot well be described as a life of action”, plots written around female characters “urged [those characters] into a false position” (298). Yet at the same time Margaret Oliphant was concerned that female readers of sensation literature might accept the portrayals of transgressive women “as something like the truth” (260). Anxiety about the corrupting influence of Braddon’s work was fuelled by the author’s own unconventional life. Braddon’s mother separated from her

unfaithful husband when Braddon was five years old; living in reduced circumstances Braddon became an actress to support herself and her mother, taking on the stage name Mary Seyton to evade some of the ill repute associated with women's acting. Later she took up writing and was involved in an adulterous relationship with the publisher John Maxwell whose wife was confined in an insane asylum in Ireland; she married Maxwell when his wife died in 1874 and they lived together until his death in 1895.⁵ In spite of the eventual legitimacy of the relationship, Braddon was unable to dissociate herself from her reputation as a sexually transgressive woman. Oliphant's fear that Braddon's female characters might be read as authentic was not unfounded; it was widely assumed that the sensational heroines of Braddon's novels were based on the author herself (Tromp et al. xxi).

The possibility that Braddon's unconventional female characters might have been imitations of their author made them especially threatening to ideologies about natural femininity; for this reason, perhaps, there was a tendency to distance Braddon from her fictional plots. She was repeatedly accused of plagiarising, particularly from French works. The *Pall Mall Gazette* accused her of copying from Feuillet's drama *Dalila* in her novel *Circe*, which was serialised in *Belgravia* in 1867 under the title of "Babington White" ("‘Dalila’ and ‘Circe’"). Helfield notes that, while Braddon was singled out as a plagiarist, her use of *Dalila* as a model "in no way differed from [the practice] of many other Victorian novelists who often borrowed ideas from the French stage without acknowledgement" (175). Braddon herself openly admitted her debt to French writers, for example in letters to her friend and fellow author Edward Bulwer-Lytton.⁶ Yet labelling Braddon's actions as copying was an effective way of severing her connection with her subversive female characters who, if not created by a real-life debauched woman, could be more securely relegated to the realm of fiction.

Whatever the relationship between Braddon and her characters, she was interested enough in both sexualised and violent women to represent them repeatedly throughout her long career. Her first novel, *The Trail of the Serpent* (1861), is about a woman who attempts to murder her husband; in another variation of Madeleine Smith, Aurora Floyd has a secret affair with a man far below her in station (*Aurora Floyd*, 1863); *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) is modelled on Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*; and the heroine of *Vixen* (1879) is evocatively named Violet Tempest. Braddon's literary career began and ended with violent and spirited women; in her short stories of the 1890s she continued to represent and re-present the Victorian murderess. In "Sweet Simplicity" (1894) the child killer Phoebe hides behind an innocent appearance while Naomi in "As the Heart Knoweth" (written 1895, published 1903) goes mad after shooting her drunken and abusive father. Undoubtedly, Braddon's most sensational murderess is the blue-eyed, blond-haired Lady Audley who pushes her husband down a well and attempts to burn her nephew while he sleeps. As with *Armada*, cases like Madeleine Smith's provided a model for *Lady Audley's Secret* in their combination of role-play, "false" identities and multiple narratives. Madeleine had two fiancés, one public, one private; similarly, Lady Audley has two husbands, each oblivious to the other's existence. As an actress, Braddon understood the concept of women's role-playing. In *Lady Audley* she explores the performative nature of the Victorian woman's identity; her heroine is constantly shifting between roles and hence between identities, spanning the spectrum from angelic to demonic femininity. Braddon's novel challenges the idea that femininity is a stable, intrinsic component of womanhood; rather, femininity is a social construct that changes guises as women change roles.

3. “A woman cannot fill such a part”: *Lady Audley’s Secret*

Good Heavens! what an actress this woman is. What an arch
trickster – what an all-accomplished deceiver.

– *Lady Audley’s Secret*

In 1868 Eliza Lynn Linton discussed a new role taken on by the young English women of mid century that she labelled The Girl of the Period (GOP). In her anonymous article of the same name Linton documents a change not simply in the reality of women’s behaviour but in the ideal; the perfect woman was no longer believed to be a “fair young English girl” but a fast, vain, mercenary protégée of the *demi-monde*. Women, Linton complained, were not “content to be what God and nature had made them” but must adorn themselves with gaudy clothing and paint their faces with makeup (172). In contrast to her unaffected predecessor, the girl of the period is characterised by unnaturalness and artificiality; she is “a creature” whose main purpose in life is “to outvie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion” (172). Mid century women are fake in both appearance and action; their “slang, bold talk, and fastness” is an “imitation” of the behaviour of prostitutes (173). Appearing bad, according to Linton, is even worse than being bad, because at least truly bad women are authentic. The girl of the period is, after all,

only a copy of the real thing; and the real thing is far more amusing than the copy, because it is real.... *Toujours perdrix* is bad providing the world over; but a continual weak imitation of *toujours perdrix* is worse. If we must have only one kind of thing, let us have it genuine; and the queens of St. John’s Wood in their unblushing honesty, rather than their imitators and make-believes in Bayswater and Belgravia. (175)

For this female writer at least, there was nothing more abhorrent than a woman appearing to be something she was not.⁷

The girl of the period was not essentially bad; in fact, Linton's very objection is that she dons the costume of the *demi-monde* without actually engaging in immoral behaviour. Hers is an "imitation of form" that is not accompanied by an "imitation of fact" and Linton disapproves of such women on the grounds that "modesty of appearance and virtue ought to be inseparable", just as immodesty of appearance should be synonymous with vice (173). Linton's ability to see that appearance does not always match reality is offset by her acknowledgement that, within wider Victorian culture, in stepping into the costume of the wicked woman the GOP becomes that woman. According to an ideology that conflates womanhood with authenticity, "no good girl can afford to appear bad, under penalty of receiving the contempt awarded to the bad" (173). In other words, the essential nature of a woman was of little consequence; it was her appearance alone that mattered. In the assessment of women's appearance, Linton privileges the male perspective. All the GOP's problems would be solved if she could "be made to see herself as she appears to the eyes of men". Men have no respect for the girl Linton describes; she neither "pleases" nor "elevates" them and, while they humour and flirt with her, they do not want to marry her (175). Yet, despite this disapproval, the GOP continued to flourish; perhaps women could see a benefit to playing her part that men could not.

Above all else, Linton's article reveals the performative nature of Victorian women's identities and the recognition that women could and did assume roles. Although Linton is emphatic in her argument that the fair English girl of the past represents woman in her natural and authentic state, the implication of her creation of a new category of women is that Victorian femininity, in whatever form it takes, is

constructed. While the GOP is at her core no different from the old ideal, her performance of the part of fast woman causes an entirely new identity to be developed for her. She is Girl of the Period not because of who she is but because of how she acts; her identity is completely performative.

Although not addressed explicitly, Linton's interpretation of the GOP suggests that if an essentially pure woman can play the part of whore then an essentially bad woman could just as easily assume the role of angel, and this is exactly the anxiety that Braddon explores in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Lady Audley is the epitome of the angel in the house; she has a sweet nature, a girlish innocence, and an ethereal beauty, and she cares about nothing more than creating a peaceful and pleasant home for her husband. At the same time she enacts multiple roles of bad femininity: bigamist, attempted murderess, arsonist, forger, and madwoman. The other characters in the novel are united in their judgement of Lady Audley as false and artificial, an "actress" by her nephew Robert's description (256). Her virtuous demeanour is universally believed to be a façade behind which she hides her true nature. When Robert discovers the full extent of his aunt's crimes he orders her to undeceive her husband by confessing "what you are, and who you are" (345). Lady Audley's identity is completely separated from her role as loving wife and companion as her wicked behaviour becomes synonymous with her true self.

Yet throughout the course of Braddon's novel it remains unclear which of the heroine's behaviours and traits are genuine and which are assumed. Although *Lady Audley* seems to be about the discrepancy between appearance and reality – who the heroine really is as contrasted with who she appears to be – there is in fact no identifiable difference between the two. For Braddon, as for Linton, appearance *is* reality; when Lady Audley performs the role of angelic wife she takes on that identity

in the same way that her performance of violence causes her to become an attempted murderess and her performance of insanity turns her into a madwoman. There is no authentic, essential Lady Audley; rather she assumes a different identity each time she performs a different set of behaviours. The performative nature of women's identities is highlighted by the fact that both the patriarchal figures in the novel and Lady Audley herself assign her identity labels to suit their various purposes. Lady Audley engages in self-representation, ascribing to herself the roles of angel and then madwoman; as representative of patriarchal authority, Robert draws on the bad woman's mythology to cast her as an inhuman fiend and later rewrites her as insane; and wider Victorian society hypocritically encourages women like Lady Audley to take on the role of girl of the period. Braddon's heroine does not possess any one of these identities, nor can she definitively choose which one she wants to occupy. Rather, to paraphrase Margaret Atwood in *Alias Grace*, she is all of these different things at once and must negotiate between all of her different selves.

(a) Lady Audley as Girl of the Period

One of Linton's major objections to the new English woman was her mercenary attitude towards marriage. "Love," Linton writes, "is the last thing she thinks of, and the least of the dangers besetting her.... The legal barter of herself for so much money, representing so much dash, so much luxury and pleasure — that is her idea of marriage" (174). Lucy Graham's motives for marrying Sir Michael are somewhat ambiguous. Although she is aware of the advantages of being the wife of an aristocrat, she appears completely oblivious to Sir Michael's devotion to her and in her manner towards him there is "nothing whatever...of the shallow artifice employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man" (7). Yet when she accepts, Sir Michael

knows from her conduct that she is marrying him only for his money and status. While Sir Michael believes it is a sin for a woman to marry for reasons other than “truth and love”, Braddon stresses the general societal expectation that women would make advantageous marriages (10). In fact, so entrenched was this idea that the Dawsons, the family Lucy works for, would have regarded the penniless governess’s rejection of Sir Michael not simply as a sign of insanity but as “something *more* than madness” (9; emphasis added). Even Sir Michael confirms the fiscal nature of Victorian matches when he refers to his marriage as a “bargain” (11).

While Linton may have disapproved, neither Braddon’s narrator nor the wider community at Audley Court blame Lucy for her decision; she has simply stepped into the role expected of her by Victorian society. After such an endorsement, even Lady Audley’s extreme displays of selfish greed and love of wealth are difficult to condemn. When her crimes are finally uncovered and she is taken to the asylum, “[h]er mercenary soul hanker[s] greedily after the costly and beautiful things of which she had become mistress” and she hoards as many of her possessions as she can, from crockery and vases to silk dresses and linen, in preparation for her isolated existence (383). While Lucy’s materialism is undoubtedly more excessive than was befitting a lady, it is portrayed as an inevitable consequence of the social script she has assumed a part in. She has learnt from her own experience the hazards of not making a prudent marriage and she clings to her belongings with the zeal of a woman who knows what it is to live without them. In addition, Lady Audley’s maid Phoebe is a constant reminder of how the wife of a poor man suffers. Phoebe is Lady Audley’s double, although she is a significantly paler version of her mistress, as illustrated in the following conversation between the two women:

‘Do you know, Phoebe, I have heard some people say you and I are

alike?’

‘I have heard them say so too, my lady,’ said the girl quietly, ‘but they must be very stupid to say it, for your ladyship is a beauty, and I’m a poor plain creature.’

‘Not at all, Phoebe,’ said the little lady superbly; ‘you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want. My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, and yours is drab; my eyebrows and eyelashes are dark, and yours are almost...white...; your complexion is sallow, and mine is pink and rosy. Why, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you’d be as good-looking as I any day.... (57-58)

In allowing herself to be coerced into marrying her violent, alcoholic cousin Luke, Phoebe is the fragile, victimised woman that Lady Audley refuses to become. While her mistress flourishes in a prosperous union, Phoebe fades into nothing.

Although she is of a similar social standing to Lucy Graham, Phoebe’s marriageability is limited precisely because she is “plain”; while Lady Audley’s beauty is natural, Phoebe would have to alter her appearance in order to rival her mistress. Voskuil writes how middle-class Victorian women “were frequently viewed as natural embodiments of authenticity” and well before the nineteenth-century cosmetics and other artificial adornments were criticised because of the artfulness their use implied (621). Discussing the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century context, Tita Chico notes that, in the eyes of their opponents, “cosmetics not only alter[ed] nature, but also offer[ed] women an opportunity to function as artists or, alternately, artificers” (110).⁸ The character of Mother Oldershaw in *Armada* connects women’s falseness with alterations to their natural physical appearance; based on notorious

beauty parlour owner and fraudster “Madame” Rachel Leverson, Oldershaw convinces gullible female customers that she can preserve their youth and beauty through the application of her cosmetic products. Linton objects to the GOP because her beauty is inauthentic; she “dyes her hair and paints her face” even though men find such artifice repulsive (172). Yet Braddon implies that by adopting a false appearance Phoebe could secure a husband as affluent as Lady Audley’s. When it comes to marriage, the substance of a woman proves relatively insignificant; it is her appearance that really counts, and whether that appearance is natural or artificial is of little consequence. Because women’s looks were believed to reflect their moral makeup, pretty girls were associated with purity just as the deformities of Lombroso and Ferrero’s born offenders signified their debasement. Attractive women were automatically cast in the role of angel, regardless of whether their personalities and behaviours were equally saintly.

(b) Lady Audley as Angel

According to Victorian gender ideologies, Lady Audley’s physical appearance is irreconcilable with her criminal tendencies; her angelic, childlike beauty has strong connotations of artlessness and innocence. Braddon’s heroine goes through a series of self-directed incarnations before she becomes Lady Audley; each of these social rebirths involves taking a new name and adopting a series of characteristics that match her latest persona, and each is based on popular beliefs about women’s beauty. Helen Maldon, impoverished daughter of a drunken ex-naval officer, marries George Talboys. As wife of the only son of a wealthy country gentleman, Helen fulfils the expectation that beautiful girls improve their positions by marrying rich men and loves George “as long as his money last[s]” (352). When George abandons her she

adopts the persona of Lucy Graham, single woman, teacher and governess; this name change signifies an attempt to disown her past and recast herself as a pure and honest woman. The Lucy Graham persona is reinforced by the community at Audley Court; although they know nothing about her, they construct a social identity for her on the basis of their expectations which she obligingly adopts. Her beauty and youthful energy cause the people around her to construct her as a living advertisement for angelic femininity, exuding innocence, sweetness and charity:

Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her. In the cottages of the poor her fair face shone like a sunbeam. She would sit for a quarter of an hour talking to some old woman...and when she tripped away, leaving nothing behind (for her poor salary gave no scope to her benevolence), the old woman would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, her beauty, and her kindliness.... Every one loved, admired, and praised her.... [E]verybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived. (5-6)

As Braddon makes clear, it is the work of the community in constructing this persona rather than any of Lucy's own actions that results in her becoming the baronet's wife; the neighbourhood's "cry" of praise for Lucy is the catalyst for Sir Michael's proposal (6). Lucy Graham is the perfect fiancée for Sir Michael; in transitioning into the Lady Audley persona she becomes the perfect wife.

Societal expectations work to Lady Audley's advantage; her example shows that once a woman attains the position of domestic angel she can get away with just about anything. In particular, Lady Audley uses her angelic beauty as a tool to maintain her perceived association with innocence; after she has set fire to the inn, she takes care to emphasise her beauty, regarding it as "weapon" at a time when she has

“double need to be well armed” (337-38). For a long time, this maintenance of her innocent appearance works; as with the Madeleine Smith case, no one suspects that a woman like Lady Audley could be treacherous or deceitful. When Robert threatens to expose her to Sir Michael as the wife of another man, Lucy responds with her own threat of telling Sir Michael that Robert is mad. Such is the baronet’s belief in his wife’s authenticity that ““he will believe anything that [Lady Audley] tell[s] him”” and she finds it easy to convince him that his nephew is indeed mentally disturbed (279). Even Robert, who is most distrustful of Lady Audley, doubts her ability to commit such a hideous crime as murder. He finds it more “probable” that he should be “the victim of some horrible hallucination” than that “a young and lovely woman should be capable of so foul and treacherous a murder” (345). So implausible is an angelic woman’s guilt that the one man who suspects her questions his own sanity in doing so.

Yet just because Lady Audley uses the angel persona to her advantage does not mean that it is a charade. Although she does behave in unfeminine, disturbing and violent ways, her angelic qualities are nonetheless authentic. She really is beautiful, pleasant and amiable, simple and childlike; she does love her husband (in her own way); and she is a good mistress, running her household effectively. While she fits the description of the GOP in many ways, in others she is a model of the ideal woman whose disappearance Linton laments. She is Sir Michael’s “friend and companion, but never his rival” and does everything in her power to “make his house his true home and place of rest” (“GOP” 172). In fact, even her most odious act of pushing her first husband down a well can be read as a desperate attempt to maintain the peace of her happy home and protect her second husband from distress. Braddon draws attention to her heroine’s lack of affectation throughout the novel. Although she uses her childish

simplicity to convince Sir Michael of Robert's madness, it is "so natural to Lady Audley to be childish" that there is "nothing studied or affected in [her] girlish action[s]" and to behave in any other way would be false (282-83). Understandably, contemporary critics like Rae and Oliphant found it impossible to reconcile Lady Audley's angelic qualities with her violent tendencies; yet because Lady Audley's identity is not intrinsic but is rather governed by the actions she performs at a particular time, she is able to move effortlessly from angel to demon and back again.

(c) Lady Audley as demon

The male characters in the novel draw on the mythologies of the good and bad woman simultaneously to cast Lady Audley in both roles. George thinks of her as "something too beautiful for earth, or earthly uses"; he also likens her to "one of those what's-its-names, who got poor old Ulysses into trouble" (57; 35). Her enchanting beauty paradoxically elicits associations of innocence and of seduction and violence even before her crimes are discovered. Ironically, it is Lady Audley's most angelic quality – her childishness – that is most potently sexualised. The male characters constantly make reference to her small stature and her youth; to Robert she is "the prettiest little creature" he has ever seen and to George she is "my little girl" (56; 18). The narrator comments that her girlishness "had a charm very few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes" (52). This childlike quality functions in exactly the same way as the Siren's overt sexuality, drawing men to her in spite of themselves: "My lady was very charming at the dinner-table; she professed the most bewitching incapacity for carving the pheasant set before her, and called Robert to her assistance" (85). Yet unlike Lydia Gwilt, who is also compared to the Greek sea nymph, Lady Audley

seems entirely unconscious of her intoxicating allure; her very presence is her siren-song and she makes no attempt to exploit her sexuality, thus preserving her artlessness while the men around her succumb one after another.

Lady Audley's childlike sex appeal illustrates the inseparability of good and bad femininity; she simultaneously occupies the symbolic roles of innocent virgin and seductive destroyer. As such, Braddon's heroine can be represented as both angel and fiend without incongruity. Surprisingly, both roles are united in their lack of authority; while the child-woman is devoid of adult responsibility, the evil woman abnegates human responsibility. In her study of twentieth-century legal and media discourses, Morrissey identifies the techniques of "monsterisation" and "mythification" that are used in representations of the murderess; while Morrissey discusses them specifically in relation to late-twentieth-century representations, these techniques form part of the age-old mythologising of women's violence and characterise representations of the murderess across time periods. Monsterisation renders the female killer inherently evil and thus inhuman while the related technique of mythification compares her to "the most frightening of mythic characters" and transforms her from a human woman into "the living embodiment of mythic evil". Both techniques "den[y] agency by insisting upon the evil nature of the murderess, thus causing her to lose her humanity" (25). As demonstrated in the figure of Lydia Gwilt, discussed in the previous chapter, connecting the murderess to the bad women of mythology deprives her of unique identity and hence of individual agency; rather than acting as an individual, she is simply filling the part that is expected of her, repeating the narrative of her violent predecessors.

Lady Audley is monsterised most decisively in the pre-Raphaelite portrait that Robert and George discover in her chamber; she is described as having a "sinister

light” in her eyes and her mouth has a “hard and almost wicked look”. The artist is accused of having painted so many “mediaeval monstrosities” that he cannot help but give his subject “something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend” (70-71). Within the textual space of the portrait, encircled by the folds of her red dress resembling flames, the angelic woman becomes the personification of demonic forces. As the extent of her crimes becomes apparent, Robert mythologises his aunt more and more. In particular, the mythological woman enters the private space of his dreams. During the night he is visited by an image of Audley Court transported to the seashore, threatened by a stormy ocean; out of the waves rises Lady Audley “transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction” (246).⁹ In Western mythology, the mermaid or female serpent is the ultimate figure of women’s destructive sexuality; William Thackeray captures the Victorian incarnation of the serpent-woman in *Vanity Fair*:

They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims. (813)

The mermaid is both human and not human, or rather she is “nonhumanity in human form”; as Nina Auerbach explains, “[h]er hybrid nature, her ambiguous status as creature, typify the mysterious, broadly and evocatively demonic powers of womanhood in general” (94).¹⁰ Robert’s casting of Lady Audley as a mermaid simultaneously amplifies and reduces her power. On the one hand it raises her to a level of preternatural indestructibility; mermaids can give life and take life but they

can never die (Auerbach 7). On the other hand, Robert's mythologising of Lady Audley performs the same function as Collins's likening of Lydia to the Siren, reducing her to a shadow without agency or authority. This dehumanising of Lady Audley constitutes an attempt by Robert to reduce the threat of the murderess by reinforcing her status as a mythological figure and thus distancing her from reality.

(d) Lady Audley as madwoman

While determined to find the truth about George's disappearance, Robert is equally adamant that his aunt should be delivered from responsibility when he discovers her part in it. The blatant evidence of Lady Audley's crimes combined with her detailed confession make it impossible to deny her guilt; however, the monstrous Lady Audley is further removed from her actions through the diagnosis of latent insanity. In her study of madness in nineteenth- and twentieth-century English culture, Showalter refers to the "fundamental alliance between 'woman' and 'madness'" that has been consistent across time periods. Drawing on the binary between male Self and female Other, she notes how "women...are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind.... [M]adness, even when experienced by men, is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine: a female malady" (*Female Malady* 3-4). The Victorian period was instrumental in cementing the connection between madness and femininity. Roy Porter writes that, before the age of sensibility in the mid eighteenth century, madness had been "quintessentially masculine", noting how the twin figures of insanity outside Bethlem Hospital, Mania and Melancholia, were male. By the 1850s, however, the majority of patients in psychiatric hospitals were women and madness became conflated with femaleness.¹¹ As a result of this association, Lady

Audley can be cast in the role of madwoman on the basis of very little scientific evidence; her femininity coupled with her unnatural violence makes her the perfect candidate for a mid-nineteenth-century diagnosis of insanity.¹²

The diagnosis functions to reduce Lady Audley's authority and agency. Without the capacity for rational thought, the madwoman is incapable of calculated plotting; her violence is thus performed not by her intrinsic self but by the mania that takes over her mind and her body and acts on her behalf. Robert sees the diagnosis as a way "to prove that [Lady Audley] is...irresponsible for her actions" and he even refers to it as an "excuse" for her behaviour (376-377). For Robert, the diagnosis is clearly a convenient means of disposing of the violent woman without a public scandal. He persuades the physician Dr Mosgrave to diagnose latent insanity in order to have his aunt safely incarcerated in an asylum. The revelation that Lady Audley is mad is an unexpected development that comes late in the book; in line with Dr Mosgrave's initial reaction on hearing Lady Audley's story, there is nothing in Braddon's representation of her heroine to suggest that there is any "evidence of madness in anything that she has done" (377). As the doctor notes, her desertion of her father, the disguising of her identity, and her bigamous marriage all suggest a "coolness and deliberation" that is incompatible with madness. She carries out her act of arson with a calm sense of purpose, possessing enough composure to ensure she has an alibi to explain her brief disappearance to Phoebe (322-23). It is only after Robert hints that his aunt may have committed violence that Mosgrave pronounces her insane, suggesting that the madness is not an essential aspect of Lady Audley's nature but is rather a label that is ascribed to her to suit the two men's purpose. The diagnosis enables the successful containment of the violent woman, ensuring that she is not able to perform further violence in the future.

However, the novel also introduces the possibility that Lady Audley's madness is a performance she puts on herself. As with playing the angel in the house, taking on the role of madwoman is a means of defending herself against the intimidation of the novel's male characters. When Robert confronts her as George's murderer, threatening to "bring upon [her] the punishment of [her] crime", she reveals her madness as a "shield" against his accusation (345; Briganti 205). Although she does not deny killing George, she pre-empts Robert by using madness as a way of renouncing responsibility:

When you say that I killed George Talboys, you say the truth. When you say that I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me; and reproached me and threatened me; my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and *I was mad!* (345-46; Braddon's emphasis)

She claims that, in becoming a madwoman, she is simply stepping into a role predetermined by her mother and her mother's mother before her. Yet it is equally possible that Lady Audley feigns insanity to protect herself from legal penalties. Regardless of whether her madness is a contrived performance, Lady Audley and the men working to contain her both use the role of madwoman to serve their conflicting purposes.

Lady Audley's insistence that she is mad and Dr Mosgrave's equally emphatic assertion that she is not point to the ambivalent treatment of madness in the novel. Although Lady Audley takes on the role of madwoman, donning her costume and eventually performing on her set in the asylum, it remains unclear whether or not she

is truly mad and indeed this is of little consequence. Braddon highlights the imprecision of madness as the sanity of several of the characters is called into question. Lieutenant Maldon wonders if his daughter's death has had a "strange effect" on George's mind and, as noted above, Robert believes his suspicions of his aunt might be the result of delusions (92; 345). In fact, the novel presents the possibility that insanity is the very condition of the Victorian psyche, that anyone and everyone could be mad:

Mad-houses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this hopeless persistency of the orderly outward world, as compared with the storm and tempest, the riot and confusion within:—when we remember how many minds must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason, mad to-day and sane to-morrow, mad yesterday and sane to-day. (205)

Braddon's treatment of madness calls into question the significance (or lack thereof) of a woman who declares herself insane in a world where everyone shares her predicament. In such a climate, Braddon suggests, the doctors may be as mad as the patients, the detectives as mad as the criminals, the victims as mad as the murderers.

The masculinist response to this uncertainty is once more to undertake a process of definition and classification. Lady Audley is mad not because her mind is diseased but because she has been labelled as such. Robert and Dr Mosgrave engage in a conspiracy to write Lady Audley out of existence, using madness as their eraser. Robert's greatest fear is that his aunt's actions will be brought to public attention, exposing the Audleys to "disgrace", and Mosgrave's solution is to arrange for Lady Audley to be surreptitiously ensconced in a Belgian asylum (380). This solution is

achieved through an act of writing; Mosgrave pens a letter to the proprietor of the *maison de santé* which effectively silences his patient forever. He assures Robert that

‘[f]rom the moment in which Lady Audley enters [the asylum]...her life, so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished. Whatever secrets she may have will be secrets forever!... If you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations.’ (381)

Chiara Briganti argues that the diagnosis “ends up erasing the individual woman to protect the myth of femininity, of woman as the Angel in the House”; like the erasure of Lydia Gwilt by Allan and Midwinter, Robert and the doctor effectively write over the violent women’s narrative with a reaffirming of patriarchal authority (205). The assertion of Lady Audley’s madness is also an assertion of Robert’s sanity; his former doubts about his mental stability dissolve as his suspicion of his aunt is vindicated. Thus the containment of the murderess has the concomitant function of validating patriarchal order and control.

4. Conclusion

Lady Audley’s Secret, like *Armada*, involves a competition for dominance between male and female narratives. It is the story of a woman who engages in violent and criminal pursuits in order to better her situation; it is also the story of the man who captures and contains her. At the beginning of the novel, Robert is without a role to play; while he takes on the identity of “barrister”, with his name in the Law List and chambers in the Temple, he has “never had a brief, or tried to get a brief, or even wished to have a brief” (32). He is lazy, unmotivated and, most significantly, effeminate, as indicated by his intense dislike of hunting and his perfect indifference

to his cousin Alicia's womanly charms (33). The pursuit of Lady Audley's secret becomes the means by which Robert discovers his place in Victorian society. Her imprisonment is accompanied by his masculinisation; by the end of the novel he has cemented his status as "a fully-fledged member of the patriarchy" by taking on the roles of husband, father, and lawyer (Cvetkovich 56). Robert's newly earned influence illustrates how the successful containment of the murderess's narrative is essential to the maintenance and reinforcement of patriarchal authority.

In particular, Braddon's novel demonstrates how the nineteenth-century masculinist discourse of medicine could be used to contain women who did not behave according to the script of proper femininity. Lady Audley effectively suffers the same fate as Lydia Gwilt, namely death and the complete erasure of her identity. In fact, Lady Audley is "killed" twice over, first when she is "buried alive" in the asylum under the alias Madame Taylor and again when, within a year of her confinement, she dies from mental distress. Before she is silenced forever, Lady Audley voices her objection to the fate that has been imposed upon her; she was, in her opinion, only performing to the socially sanctioned script of using her looks to improve her situation:

Has my beauty brought me to *this*? Have I plotted and schemed to shield myself, and lain awake in the long deadly nights trembling to think of my dangers, for *this*? I had better have given up at once, since *this* was to be the end. I had better have yielded to the curse that was upon me, and given up when George Talboys first came back to England. (391; Braddon's emphasis)

Lady Audley's example illustrates how the transgressive Victorian woman is destined to suffer *this* fate – containment and eventual erasure – even if her transgressions are

in pursuance of conventional goals. No matter what Lady Audley does to protect herself, patriarchal discourses will always be able write over her, even turning the identity she adopts in her defence against her. Although Robert believes he is performing an act of clemency by saving his aunt from the possibility of execution, Lady Audley sees the use of medical discourse to silence her for what it is: a fate worse than death. ““I do not thank you for your mercy,”” she tells Robert, ““for I know exactly what it is worth”” (394). For the Victorian murderess, perhaps, there is nothing worse than not being able to make her voice heard.

In fact, Briganti argues that there is a “chain of silent women” haunting *Lady Audley’s Secret*, from the “quiet nuns” who first dwelt in the convent that Audley Court used to be, to the heroine for whom “the asylum of the convent” is replaced by “the insane asylum” (191). The difference, of course, is that while the former constitutes a self-imposed silence that is associated with power and autonomy, the latter is a forced silence that specifically eliminates agency. In response to this silencing, Margaret Atwood allows her Victorian murderess to speak out. Atwood’s late-twentieth-century novel *Alias Grace* is a revision of the murderess that centres on the voice of the violent woman. Yet, at the same time, Atwood recognises the power of women’s chosen silence and privacy; like the nuns evoked by Braddon, Atwood’s murderess creates her own private cloister in which she seeks refuge from male efforts to possess her.

Chapter Four

Returning to the Victorian Murderess: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

Margaret Atwood's 1996 novel *Alias Grace* is a re-presentation of real-life Victorian murderess Grace Marks from a late-twentieth-century perspective. The location of the novel's action in nineteenth-century Canada enables a re-evaluation of Victorian gender ideologies, allowing the murderess to be viewed through a lens that was not available to authors like Braddon and Collins. Atwood slants her lens on a feminist angle, critiquing the treatment of violent Victorian women on the basis of second-wave feminist politics. Her writing can be situated in what has been termed the "feminist counter-public sphere", defined by Rita Felski as "an oppositional public arena for the articulation of women's needs in critical opposition to the values of a male-defined society" (164).¹ Within this oppositional space, Atwood draws attention to the oppression and disenfranchisement of the Victorian woman. Yet, through its anachronistic transposing of twentieth-century discourses to the nineteenth-century context, *Alias Grace* is also a commentary on the current treatment of women and the perceived relationship between gender and violence. The return to the Victorian murderess is indicative of a persisting desire to resolve the contradictions she embodies, suggesting that nineteenth-century ideologies continue to inform current representations of violent women.

The Victorian fascination with women's violence continues today, as the recent spate of representations in film, television and popular fiction indicates. Murderesses like Aileen Wuornos are commodified in the media, their narratives rewritten, packaged and marketed to a public that eagerly consumes them. In the 1990s, media coverage was accompanied by an increased critical interest in women's violence; according to one feminist scholar, "1991 was the year when what had

seemed an entirely unremarkable phenomenon – the issue of female aggression and violence – first emerged as the hottest topic of controversy and debate” (Kirsta 1). The debate, which persists into the twenty-first century, centres on the validity of Victorian assumptions about women’s status as passive victims of male violence. John Archer, a prolific researcher on human violence, sums up one perspective on behalf of all the contributors to his 1994 book *Male Violence*:

We acknowledge that females are quite capable of aggression, and may even be violent in some cases. But we do not let this side-track us from the much greater social problem of male violence by mistaking aggression for violence or by over-emphasizing the relatively unusual, but highly newsworthy, cases of the seriously violent wife, the female sexual abuser of children or the woman serial killer. (4)

Here Archer expresses a neo-Victorian reluctance to acknowledge the existence of women’s violence.² His recognition that attention is paid to violent women in the media is offset by his suggestion that this fascination is a direct result of the rarity of the reported behaviour. Female killers, according to Archer, are interesting only because they are so scarce; women’s violence is too unusual to be worthy of serious study.

Numerous feminist scholars have contested this position, arguing that the paucity of women’s violence, while undeniable, does not negate its existence entirely. Phyllis Chesler writes that “[b]ecause male aggression is both so visible and so deadly, it tends to obscure our view of female violence and aggression, which is more often subtle, less visible, but chronic”, while according to Patricia Pearson the argument that women play no part in the perpetration of violence is “one of the most abiding myths of our time” (Chesler 35; Pearson 7).³ In an attempt to correct the

oversight of women as violent perpetrators, a multitude of books about women's violence has been written in the past two decades.⁴ Current theoretical interest in women's violence is influenced by the fact that female violent crime does appear to be on the increase. Pearson documents arrest rates for women's violent crime growing at twice the rate of men's at the end of the twentieth century while Alix Kirsta notes that violent assaults by women in Britain increased by sixty-seven percent in the decade 1981 to 1991, although she qualifies this by pointing out that only ten percent of female prisoners are incarcerated for violence (Pearson 31; Kirsta 27).⁵ Second-wave feminism has itself fuelled fears about women's increasing violence, with feminist retaliatory assaults, known since Lorena Bobbitt's dismembering of her husband as "Bobbitttry", causing particular anxiety at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶

The growing recognition that women are committing more acts of violence is accompanied by an anxiety that they are getting away with murder. Just as women in the nineteenth century could use their roles as domestic angels to perform violence without suspicion, there is concern that today's female killers are benefiting from gender ideologies. The fear, summed up by Renée Heberle, is that when it comes to sentencing "women...benefit from their womanliness, while men suffer for their manliness" (1103). This anxiety, however, seems to be only partially founded; for example, while more male than female killers are executed in the United States, Heberle notes how women are more likely to receive the death penalty for domestic homicide than men. In a continuation of Victorian spheres ideology, women who commit violence in the home are "breaking the rules of gender" and so are more severely punished, whereas men are simply "fulfilling the grim assumptions society holds about masculinity" and are treated more leniently (Heberle 1105). The Victorian

contradictions regarding the murderess continue; the persistent belief that violence is not a natural female activity exists side-by-side with a fear that this very belief is sanctioning women's performance of aggressive and violent behaviours and hence enabling those behaviours to intensify.

This ongoing debate about women's relationship to violence informs Atwood's re-presentation of Canadian murderess Grace Marks. In simultaneously engaging with Victorian and current gender ideologies, Atwood illustrates the continuation of nineteenth-century beliefs about women's violence to the present day. In particular, she suggests that across both time periods patriarchal discourses have contained violent women, and women more generally, by defining them as objects of analysis rather than self-aware subjects. The public discourses of law, the media, and particularly medicine and psychology have traditionally been responsible for defining and constructing the murderess. Yet, through a process of feminist revisionism, Atwood suggests that ultimately these masculinist discourses are ineffective; their attempts to reach a definitive truth about the murderess prove futile and they result only in misunderstandings and confusion. As a counter to these discourses, Atwood creates a feminine space which is associated with women's autonomy and freedom from patriarchal constraints, implying that the only adequate understanding of the violent woman comes from listening to the private and unspoken narrative of the woman herself. A return to the Victorian murderess in the late twentieth century enables this narrative to be told, providing the previously silenced woman with a freedom of expression she was not permitted in her own time.

1. Patriarchal Discourses: Women in the Public Realm

I think a lot of the energy in women's writing over the past ten years...has come from being able to say things that once you couldn't say. And therefore, being able to see things that once you couldn't see.

– “An Interview with Margaret Atwood”,

20 April, 1983

As examples of fictional murderesses show, opportunities for self-representation, however fleeting, could give the Victorian woman a degree of authority she was typically denied. Critical second-wave feminism has recognised the power of self-representation and a major objective has been to break the Victorian silence by enabling women to relate their own experiences in their own words. As Hedges and Fishkin note, “[t]hroughout the 1970s ‘silence’ became an increasing focus of feminist attention” (4). They cite texts such as Marge Piercy’s “Unlearning to Not Speak” (1973), Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* (1978) and Adrienne Rich’s *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979) as beginning the process of giving voice to women’s experience. As a result of the work of feminist writers like these, women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have far greater rights of speech than their Victorian sisters. In particular, women’s speech is no longer restricted to private forums and the public realm has become a (predominantly) safe space in which the female voice can be heard. Self-ascribed “feminist” authors like Atwood take part in the continual project of publicly representing women’s stories (Bouson 3). Throughout her career as an essayist, poet and novelist, Atwood has documented both women’s oppression and their rebellion, with a particular focus on the development of women’s subjectivity in patriarchal society. Her earliest published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), details

the loss of selfhood experienced by a woman when she takes on the roles of wife and mother; *Surfacing* (1972) centres on a woman's rejection of masculinist culture in her reversion to a feral state; and *Cat's Eye* (1989) explores the sometimes unpleasant realities of girlhood friendships. Atwood is especially concerned with relating the narratives of women whose representation has conventionally been controlled by male authors; her most recent novel *The Penelopiad* (2005), for example, is a retelling of *The Odyssey* from Penelope's perspective.

However, Atwood is also acutely aware of the fragility of women's recently acquired position as speaking subjects. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a futuristic, post-nuclear-fallout society where women are once more defined on the basis of their reproductive capacity; the handmaids, to which category the protagonist Offred belongs, are reduced to silent incubators for children who will be raised by other women. The right to write continues to be complicated by the sex of the author, as Atwood points out in her collection of critical essays *Second Words*, published in 1982. Commenting on the unstable identities of late-twentieth-century women writers, she argues that they must "divide themselves in two, thinking of themselves as two different people: a 'writer' and a 'woman'" (195). According to Atwood, the act of representing has not yet been completely reconciled with the state of being female. In addition, Atwood recognises a continuation of Victorian binary views of womanhood, noting a tendency even today to polarise women into good and bad types. In an essay appropriately titled "The Curse of Eve", she writes: "Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is...and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human failings...especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not merely human, you're worse than human. You are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster" (*Second Words* 226).

Women can speak, Atwood argues, but that speech remains contained by masculinist definitions of what a woman is and should be; women's public articulation is still mediated by patriarchal discourses.

Atwood negotiates between women's newly obtained freedom to speak and the continuing limitations on their self-representation by employing a postmodernist metafictional approach to her rewriting of the Grace Marks story. As a product of the late twentieth century, the fictional Grace is able to narrate her story in much greater detail and with much more candour than her nineteenth-century counterparts; her voice comprises a substantial portion of the narrative and, unlike Lydia Gwilt whose diary is framed by a male omniscient narrator, Grace begins and ends the novel from her own perspective. As well as writing her own version of events, Grace is permitted to comment on representations of her narrative in public discourses, critically evaluating the process of her own reproduction. Atwood directly draws attention to the competition between Grace's first-person narrative and those of patriarchal discourses by placing Grace's self-representation alongside depictions of her in legal, medical and media discourses. In doing so, Atwood enables her murderess to challenge these perceptions, writing over constructions of her identity in the public domain with her own reconstruction of her self.

The unavoidable entrance of the convicted murderess into the public realm results in an automatic loss of control over her narrative as it is appropriated by others who relate it from their own perspectives for their own purposes. The novel documents numerous instances of Grace's identity being taken from her and reproduced in public discourses: her lawyer, Kenneth MacKenzie, constructs her at the trial as "next door to an idiot"; the doctors label her mad and incarcerate her in an asylum; and the newspapers write her as McDermott's "paramour" (26; 30). Atwood

incorporates extracts from Susanna Moodie's 1853 autobiography *Life in the Clearings*, letters by Grace's doctors, and newspaper accounts of the trial, all of which attempt to construct Grace according to the writers' own agendas. Although one of these historical documents is Grace's confession, she has no more ownership over this narrative than any of the others, stating that it was simply "what the lawyer told [her] to say" (116). Within the public realm, the murderess has no opportunity to speak for herself and must watch while her identity is constructed by others.

These public discourses, Atwood suggests, have been ascribed a status as "truth" which they do not always deserve; her fictional Grace, for instance, emphatically declares that the assertion that she was McDermott's lover is a lie. Indeed, Atwood includes these official, supposedly accurate documents precisely in order to question their validity. The juxtaposition of these historical accounts against extracts from poetry challenges the claim to truth of so-called "factual" texts. As an example of historiographic metafiction, Atwood's novel collapses the boundary between history and fiction; rather than forming separate ontological categories, with history representing truth and fiction lies, historiographic metafiction asserts that both history and literature involve a re-presentation of the past on the basis of shared conventions such as diegesis, anecdote and organisation.⁷ Atwood recognises that all representations of violent Victorian women are characterised by the interplay of facts, conjecture and invention. In her Afterword to the novel, she writes,

I have of course fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history). I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as equivocally 'known.' ... When in doubt I have tried to choose the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities

where feasible. Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent. (*Alias Grace*, 541-42)

Atwood is conscious of the role that documents play in constructing history and that her own novel is one such document. “The past” is not something concrete and tangible which is represented objectively through text; rather the past *is* text; it is “made of paper”. Written on the paper are contesting narratives: “Records, documents, newspaper stories, eyewitness reports, gossip and rumour and opinion and contradiction” (Atwood, “In Search” 1513-14). In accordance with this approach to history, Atwood has Isabella Beeton’s description of hysterics in her *Book of Household Management* jostling for authority with Tennyson’s “Maud” and Grace’s confession preceding a telling excerpt from Patmore’s “The Angel in the House”. As Magali Cornier Michael writes, “the various texts come to occupy equal status as neither/both valid and fiction/fabrication. By being placed side by side, all the texts that make up the novel begin to challenge one another’s authority as well as any universal notion of ‘truth’” (421). As a result of the juxtapositions of these various narratives, the historical accounts of Grace that were constructed in public discourses lose their claim to being authentic, definitive versions of events.

In destabilising the veracity of historical documents, Atwood suggests that a narrative’s status as an “official” account is solely contingent on its public narration. When Grace’s friend and fellow servant Mary Whitney dies, the acceptable but false version of her death – that she died of a fever – becomes the true narrative. The maid Agnes explains Mary’s death to the other servants:

[She] said it was a sudden fever, and for a woman as pious as she was, she lied very well; and I stood by Mary’s feet keeping silent. And one [of the servants] said, Poor Grace, to wake up in the morning and find her

cold and stark in the bed beside you, with no warning at all. And another said, It makes your flesh creep to think of it, my own nerves would never stand it.

Even Grace, who witnessed the death herself and is aware that Mary died as a result of the abortion of her illegitimate child, begins to believe that the rewritten version is the authentic one: “Then it was if it had really happened; I could picture it, the waking up with Mary in the bed right beside me, and touching her, and finding she would not speak to me, and the horror and distress I would feel...” (208). Through a process of public telling and retelling, Atwood suggests, narratives become accepted truths even if they are completely fabricated.

In a context where narration is akin to the construction of reality, the murderess’s self-representation becomes a particularly powerful activity. Through narrating her story, Atwood’s fictional Grace can participate in her own identity construction to an extent that the historical Grace, and other murderesses like her, were never permitted. When Grace begins telling her story to the physician Simon Jordan, she finds the act of narrating “difficult”; her bodily containment as a convict is mirrored in the silencing of her voice – instrument of self-construction – and she has not “really” talked in fifteen years (77). Like Lydia Gwilt’s writing, Grace’s speech is inseparable from Grace’s self. Narrating her story grants her physical liberty; the prison governor has given Simon his word that “as long as [Grace] continue[s] to talk” she will remain out of both the asylum and solitary confinement (46). She also gains emotional freedom from the act of narration, enjoying the attention and encouragement it elicits from Simon. “I feel,” she tells the reader, “as if everything I say is right. As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I am doing well” (79). The pleasure she derives from

narrating is simultaneously calming and erotic: “I feel as if he is...drawing on my skin.... As if hundreds of butterflies have settled all over my face, and are softly opening and closing their wings” (79). Finally permitted to tell her story, the murderess seems to be liberated from constructions of her identity within patriarchal discourses.

Yet Grace’s narrative is far from her own; she herself recognises that she is engaging in a mutual process of narration as she relates her story and Simon transcribes it. In fact, if writing down is an act of authentication then it is Simon who has the greatest control over Grace’s narrative; writing her narrative on a blank page is tantamount to branding her, engraving her identity onto the bare canvas of her skin. Grace’s speech is dependent on Simon’s participation; without his clinical interest she never would have been allowed to narrate her story in the first place. Her narrative is elicited from her by Simon’s questioning; any comments she makes cease to be her own the minute they leave her mouth, becoming instead answers to his inquiries. Grace is conscious of the ownership Simon gains of her story, and hence of her self, through this process, although she cannot exactly articulate this awareness.

Underneath the pleasurable sensation she feels during their talks,

there is another feeling, a feeling of being wide-awake and watchful. It’s like being wakened suddenly in the middle of the night, by a hand over your face, and you sit up with your heart going fast, and no one is there. And underneath that there is another feeling still, a feeling like being torn open; not like a body of flesh, it is not painful as such, but like a peach; and not even torn open, but too ripe and splitting open of its own accord.

And inside the peach there’s a stone. (79)

Grace is aware that it is dangerous to open up too much for Simon. She sees that he is not trying to force information from her but is rather exploiting her own desire to speak in order to gain access to her narrative and hence to penetrate the core of her identity.

In the creation of her fictional physician, Atwood illustrates how psychological discourses appropriate women's identities. Another postmodernist aspect of the novel is its blurring of past and present, as illustrated by the anachronistic introduction of depth psychology into the nineteenth-century context. Atwood relocates psychoanalytic therapy in order to demonstrate how the Victorian distinction between male Self and female Other anticipated twentieth-century psychological discourses.⁸ As discussed in Chapter One, studies like Lombroso and Ferrero's *The Female Offender* reveal the Victorian need to know the Other in order to dissipate the fear of the unfamiliar, a need which also found expression in the psychoanalytic theories that developed at the end of the century. In the analyst/analysand relationship, psychoanalytic therapy encapsulates the polar positions of men as knowing subjects and women as objects of study. As Freud recognised in 1932, "[t]hroughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity" ("Femininity" 342-43). Naturally, by "people" Freud means men, plucky male explorers venturing into the uncharted territory of the female mind, searching for the single clue that will solve the puzzle of womanhood. Freudian psychoanalysis is founded on this distinction between male traveller and female terrain as, of course, the vast majority of Freud's patients, on whose case studies his theories were based, were women.

Like Freud's patients, Atwood's fictional Grace is represented as the locus of knowledge, a site on which debates about the nature of knowledge are played out.

Grace's narrative becomes important not simply for the sake of discovering who killed Nancy and Kinnear but also for understanding the human psyche, from the workings of memory to the role of the unconscious, the validity of hypnotism to the possible existence of multiple personalities within the one mind. The male physicians in the novel thus have an investment in the telling of Grace's narrative that goes beyond knowing the murderess's personal story; for the characters who seek knowledge, knowing Grace is the equivalent to knowing the secret of the Other. In one of the novel's epigraphs, Dr Joseph Workman, superintendent of the asylum where Grace was a patient after the murders, outlines the difficulties of studying the human psyche which cannot be accessed through dissection like the body's anatomical organs: "When a child, I have played games with a blindfold obscuring my vision. Now I am like that child. Blindfolded, groping my way, not knowing where I am going, or if I am in the proper direction. Someday, someone will remove that blindfold" (51). Simon appoints himself the task of removing the blindfold, employing proto-psychoanalytic techniques like association and dream analysis in order to overcome Grace's amnesia and discover what he believes will be the murderess's authentic narrative.

Within the framework of psychoanalytic discourse, though, any narrative Grace tells will never be her own; it will be constructed by her analyst and spoken through her mouth in much the same way that Doctor Downward's murder plot is acted by Lydia's hand. Each week Simon brings objects for Grace to consider, hoping that one will trigger her memories of the murders. Although his premise is to discover what each object "causes *her* to imagine", it is Simon's imagination that dictates proceedings: "This week he's attempted various root vegetables, hoping for a connection that will lead downwards: Beet – Root Cellar – Corpses, for instance; or

even Turnip – Underground – Grave” (103-04; emphasis added). The associations are Simon’s not Grace’s; he desires her to replicate his connections not to create her own. Grace is right to be wary of Simon’s attempts to draw on her; through the therapeutic relationship he literally tries to create her thoughts and write her history from his own perspective. Rather than providing an insight into the murderess as it purports to do, Simon’s method prohibits his access to the knowledge he so wishes to gain.

Depth psychology, Atwood suggests, is a greater reflection on those who practice it than on those who it is practiced upon. The search for the essence of womanhood is presented as something of a grail quest, the spoils of which exist only in the mind of the seeker. Any information Simon elicits from Grace comes from his own mind and hence, while providing no clues to the patient’s identity, speaks volumes about the doctor. It is Simon’s own obsessions rather than any objective scientific enquiry that compel him to study Grace, although he lacks awareness of his own motive. He is fixated on accessing the core of her being and describes her using repeated metaphors of penetration: a nut he must crack, a locked box to which he must find the key, an oyster he tries to “open up”, protagonist in a story which he is determined to “get to the bottom of” (61; 153; 372). “My object,” he writes to a fellow doctor, “is to wake the part of her mind that lies dormant – to probe down below the threshold of her consciousness, and to discover the memories that must perforce lie buried there” (152-53). Simon’s quest for knowledge about Grace is inextricable from sexual desire and possession. The analogy between psychological and sexual penetration is crystallized in Simon’s belief that it is part of his job to visit whores: he “considers it the duty of his profession to probe life’s uttermost depths, and although he has not probed very many of them as yet, he has at least made a beginning” (86). In knowing women – psychologically or sexually – Simon is able to

possess them. When Dr DuPont tells Simon he would like to hypnotise Grace, Simon objects because “Grace is his territory” and “he must repel poachers” (350).

Discovering the contents of Grace’s psyche and solving her mystery is analogous to gaining ownership over her, in the same vein as sexual penetration or settling land.

Unlike Grace who is given the authority of self-representation, Simon is portrayed by the omniscient narrator, illustrating his detachment from the position of self-aware subject. The narrator, who, although genderless, is conflated with the novel’s female author, effectively reverses the therapeutic relationship by penetrating Simon’s subconscious and studying his behaviour in the same way he studies his female patient. Analyst becomes analysand as the narrator dissects his dreams, motivations, and unconscious sexual fantasies before a discerning reader. Like Robert Audley’s, Simon’s dreams centre on mermaid-like figures, revealing his fascination with seductive and deadly female sexuality. He dreams he is in his childhood home, locked out of the maids’ rooms that he used to intrude into without permission; the one door that will open leads him into the sea, where the maids caress him and then swim away, leaving him to drown (159-60). In another dream he is strangled by the hair of an unknown woman and the sensation he feels is described as “painful and almost unbearably erotic” (226). Although Simon does not consciously recognise his sexual desire for Grace, the narrator draws attention to it, giving the reader an insight into his behaviour that Simon himself lacks. As he begins to realise that he will never get to the bottom of Grace’s psyche, his desire is displaced onto the acts of intercourse with his landlady Mrs Humphreys, who he imagines is Grace, and the relentlessly penetrative digging of a vegetable garden, though it is not the season for planting. During Grace’s hypnotism, Simon asks her whether she had a sexual relationship with McDermott. “He hadn’t been intending to pose this question,” the narrator says. “But

isn't it – he sees it now – the one thing he most wants to know?" (464). Simon's unconscious desire for Grace, which the narrator (and the reader) has been aware of all along, only enters Simon's conscious mind as his narrative comes to a close, illustrating his ultimate lack of self-awareness.

While the psychoanalyst believes he is searching for the essence of womanhood, what he finds is a greater understanding of himself and his own discourse; the female patient remains as elusive as she was to begin with. As the narrator comments on Simon's behalf, "the fact is that he can't say anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him. Or rather it's Grace herself who eludes him. She glides ahead of him, just out of his grasp, turning her head to see if he's still following" (473). This ungraspable state is maintained by the patient herself who, far from being a passive object of exploration, actively defies the analyst's attempts at penetration. Simon's efforts to understand Grace are thwarted as she resists playing the part of object of study by refusing to follow the rules of psychoanalytic therapy. Realising that whatever information she tells Simon will automatically become his property, Grace is selective about what she shares with him. She possesses knowledge that she purposely keeps from him, although the reader becomes a privileged recipient of this information. Ironically, these withholdings are often in response to the objects Simon brings in with the specific purpose of penetrating Grace's psyche. The first object he presents her with is an apple, asking her what it makes her think of. There is an obvious inconsistency between what Grace knows and what she chooses to say:

I beg your pardon, Sir, I say. I do not understand you.

It must be a riddle. I think of Mary Whitney, and the apple peelings we threw over our shoulders that night, to see who we would marry. But I will not tell him that. (44)

Grace knows the answer Simon is looking for, but she chooses to tell him something different, refusing to participate in the game:

...is there any kind of apple you should not eat? he says.

A rotten one, I suppose, I say.

He's playing a guessing game, like Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum.

There is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces whether you have guessed what it is.

...

The apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil.

Any child could guess it. But I will not oblige. (45)

In contrast to the inevitable containment of Lady Audley by medical discourse, Atwood's twentieth-century rewriting demonstrates how women can fight against male attempts to define them by not participating in their discourses. Grace avoids Simon's penetration by refusing to open up to him as he desires; her ability to conceal her narrative proves that the masculinist discourse of depth psychology is completely ineffective in the face of female resistance. As long as Grace is able to keep her narrative private, patriarchal discourses will always fail to contain her.

2. Women's Private Discourses

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –
 As if my Brain had split –
 I tried to match it – Seam by Seam –
 But could not make it fit.

– Emily Dickinson, c. 1860

(qtd. in *Alias Grace* 458)

Masculine discourses in the novel document the public, “official” versions of events which are generally accepted as true; they are represented in legal reports, newspaper articles, and physicians’ diagnoses. These discourses are also unitary, as the example of psychoanalysis clearly illustrates. For Simon, each object that he sets in front of his patient can have only one meaning; an apple signifies one thing and he will continue probing until Grace gives him the “right answer”. Simon speaks using what Bakhtin has termed a “unitary language” which attempts to impose artificial order on heteroglossic reality. Language, Bakhtin argues, is stratified according to “socio-ideological” distinctions to create “languages of social groups, ‘professional’ and ‘generic’ languages, [and] languages of generations” (272). While Simon clearly speaks in the “professional” language of medicine and psychology, Cristie March argues that this is simply a microcosm of wider patriarchal society: “Dr Jordan’s unitary language is not only the language of his profession, but also of his male social presence: the unitary language of patriarchy” (81).⁹ In contrast to this restrictive patriarchal language, Atwood explores a private feminine language, characterised not by objectivity and unity but by embroidery and multiplicity. For Grace, an apple is a symbol of the Fall, but it is also a food and has additional connotations of marriage and history. Drawing on the multiplicity of meaning, women can write against the

official versions of themselves presented in the public realm to create their own unique histories and identities in their own discourses. By keeping these discourses secret, Atwood argues, women can prevent their containment within unitary language, thus retaining possession over them.

As analyses of Victorian women's diaries show, according to Victorian gender ideologies secrecy in women was both prized as an asset and decried as a sign of feminine duplicity and treachery, a contradiction that Atwood recognises. When Grace's father is implicated in acts of violence against Catholic sympathisers, he expects his wife to remain silent about it, a marker of dishonesty, in the same breath as he condemns women as untrustworthy. Grace is also expected to keep her father's secret, although she has "no idea at all of what it was" (125). These are patriarchal responses to female secrecy; for the women of Atwood's text, on the other hand, privacy is unequivocally a means of gaining freedom, preserving uniqueness and maintaining ownership. As a woman, a servant, and a prisoner, Grace's inner dialogue is her only possession. She relates her morning routine in the Penitentiary in her private narration to the reader: "Today when I woke up there was a beautiful pink sunrise, with the mist lying over the fields like a white soft cloud of muslin, and the sun shining through the layers of it all blurred and rosy like a peach gently on fire" (275). Within the confines of the prison, in which she cannot affix the pronoun "mine" even to her nightdress "because we own nothing here and share all in common", these personal thoughts become her sole property (275). For the disenfranchised Victorian woman of Atwood's novel, her internal dialogue is the only thing she has complete ownership of; keeping this dialogue secret is thus her sole means of retaining personal power and self-possession.

Women's potential for deception extends beyond their ability to keep secrets to their active spreading of untruths. Feminine deceit is explicitly aligned with women's narrative in the novel through the motifs of sewing and quilting. Verbs associated with needlework embody the double meanings of piecing something together and behaving deceitfully.¹⁰ The multiplicity of the words "craft", "fabricate" and "embroider" indicate the long-established conflation of narrative with lies; more specifically they link *women's* narrative to dishonesty through the feminine pursuit of handcrafts. Historically, women in literature who have been skilled at sewing have also been cunning and resourceful. Perhaps the most famous example is Homer's Penelope, re-presented in Atwood's latest novel, who uses the weaving of Odysseus's burial shroud as a means of delaying suitors and preserving her chastity.¹¹ In *Alias Grace*, Reverend Verringer and Simon bring together the concepts of sewing, narrative, falsity and femininity in their discussion of Susanna Moodie's account of Grace. Mrs Moodie, Verringer explains,

'is a literary lady, and like all such, and indeed like the sex in general, she is inclined to – '

'Embroider,' says Simon. (223)

Women's narratives, according to these men, are flawed because they are overly influenced by fiction and hence are prone to inaccuracies.

However, Atwood suggests that feminine "embroidery" is the most positive feature of women's narrative as it enables women to retain control of their own stories. Substantial critical attention has been paid to the significance of quilting in the novel, much of it arguing that the handcraft represents a uniquely feminine discourse. Gillian Siddall sees quilting as a "private discursive mode" available only to women and Margaret Rogerson argues that quilting is "a form of feminine discourse" that

“empowers Grace to speak in a language that is not universally accessible” (Siddall 85; Rogerson 6). Like her literal sewing, the narrative Grace presents to Simon is made up of a series of blocks which must be pieced together. Yet Simon cannot sew; he does not possess Grace’s uniquely feminine skills and is therefore unable to stitch together the narrative fragments Grace prepares for him. Thus, Grace can speak her narrative out loud but still retain control over it. When Grace is finally able to assemble her own quilt she chooses a Tree of Paradise but changes the pattern to better represent her story, sewing a border of snakes instead of the traditional vines. If quilting is a uniquely feminine discourse that is “unreadable” by men then, in quilting her story, Grace in effect reveals herself in secret, in the privacy of an all-female space.¹²

In contrast to the male construction of objective “reality”, the female domain in the novel is characterised by fabrication, both literally in the act of sewing and figuratively in the act of narration. Grace’s thoughts in the penitentiary are largely embroideries; although she visualises it vividly in her mind’s eye, “[i]n fact” Grace cannot see the sunrise because the cell windows are too high to look out of. She hears the words to “Tom, Tom, the piper’s son” in her head and changes the ending:

Tom, Tom, the piper’s son,
Stole a pig and away he run,
And all the tune that he could play
Was over the hills and far away.

Here Grace rewrites a male-authored nursery-rhyme, consciously embellishing it in order to make it her own. However, she recognises that she will lose ownership of her rewritten narrative as soon as she makes it public: “I knew I’d remembered it wrong,” she tells the reader, “but I didn’t see why I shouldn’t make it come out in a better

way; and as long as I told no one of what was in my mind, there was no one to hold me to account, or correct me” (276). Grace has the most power over information when she keeps it to herself; as soon as she shares it, it becomes subject to the laws of masculine reality and hence slips out of her control. The combination of privacy and embroidery becomes a means by which Grace can keep hold of her unique subjectivity in the face of persistent attempts by patriarchal males to possess her; it enables her to sew a unique narrative that only she knows the pattern for.

In Atwood’s text, the feminine attributes of secrecy and fabrication that women have traditionally been condemned for actually serve as assets. Atwood subverts women’s containment in the private sphere by suggesting that this very privacy is women’s greatest source of freedom, hypothesising a secret space within the female mind where women can find expression. For the silenced Victorian woman, this space serves a similar function to the private diary; it is a “second self” that enables her to construct an autonomous identity. However, unlike the diary which can be easily infiltrated by prying male readers, the private realm in women’s minds is impenetrable by men and hence safeguards female narratives against male intrusion and appropriation. As the failure of psychoanalytic examination reveals, this space is characterised by fluidity and multiplicity; comprised of dreams, hallucinations and misremembrances, its language refuses to conform to the discursive rules of patriarchy and therefore it cannot be understood by the men who seek to know its meaning. Although Simon wishes to attach fixed significance to Grace’s dreams, they are associated with confusion and multiplicity from the beginning. The first time Simon asks Grace if she has had any dreams she mistakes his meaning of the word, thinking that he is asking her if she has plans and hopes for her future (114). The content of Grace’s dreams is ambiguous and uncertain; one night she dreams of her

mother being buried at sea in her winding sheet, but the sheet comes undone “and then I knew that this was not my mother at all, but some other woman, and she was not dead inside the sheet at all, but still alive” (193). Further, there is uncertainty as to whether visions like this are really dreams or if they indicate another state of consciousness. Grace herself tells the reader that her vision of red peonies growing in the penitentiary yard is “not a dream” and she is confined to the asylum because the doctors believe this is a hallucination she experienced wakefully (281). In spite of Simon’s endeavours, Grace’s subconscious activity avoids unitary definition and classification, remaining ambiguous and always partially obscured from view.

The existence of this hidden realm splits women in two: their public selves that they share with the world (symbolised by the parts of her narrative Grace relates to Simon) and their private selves to which men are forbidden access. Atwood literalises this split by creating two personalities in her murderess, one largely public personality called Grace and another, Mary, who remains hidden bar a brief appearance during hypnosis. In giving her murderess a dissociative disorder, Atwood draws attention to a particular strand of philosophy and psychology that has been used to contain women across history. Originally encompassed under the term “Hysteria”, dissociation was first described as an illness by Hippocratic doctors in the fifth century BC.¹³ Derived from the Greek word *hystera*, meaning “uterus”, and literally regarded as “wandering womb” syndrome, hysteria’s main symptoms of breathing problems and a feeling of suffocation were said to be caused by the womb which, craving pregnancy, travelled around the woman’s body and put pressure on her internal organs (Mitchell 8). Since this time, dissociation has undergone numerous reconceptualisations but all of these have functioned to marginalise women, relegating them to the position of pathological object of rational male observation. With the rise

of Christianity and the decline of medicine in the third century AD, hysteria was transformed from a physical sickness of the womb to a spiritual failing, namely a woman's wilful seduction and possession by the Devil. Sufferers, who were recast as witches, experienced anaesthesia and convulsions and exhibited bizarre behaviours that were labelled satanic. By the late nineteenth century dissociation was once again viewed as a medical condition, the location of the problem shifting to the brain. Alfred Binet and Pierre Janet each devised a theory of double consciousness, paving the way for current diagnoses of multiple personality. Binet located a "hidden observer" who could act and think independently of the original personality, while Janet discovered that thoughts, feelings and memories could dissociate from an individual's conscious mind, clustering to form a "secondary consciousness" (Ross 29; Braude 25).

The relocation of the cause of hysteria from the womb to the brain that accompanied this remedicalisation opened up the possibility for the condition to be exhibited by men. Yet, as Juliet Mitchell notes, this did not result in an ungendered redefining of hysteria; in fact, "once its origin was no longer thought to be biologically gender-specific...then hysteria's femininity had to be more firmly established; it had to be refeminized" (11). Mitchell sees hysteria as the "essential other side" of psychic normality or healthy behaviour; hence it is always present and, as the other to rational man, always feminised (4). In 1895 Breuer and Freud hypothesised that hysteria was brought on by childhood sexual abuse; however, Freud later repudiated this theory, claiming that it was not real abuse but the phantasy of sexual possession by the father that caused his female patients to dissociate (Ross 30). This had the effect of expanding hysteria from a defence mechanism that affected some women to an unavoidable condition of femininity; given that all women,

according to Freud, experienced unconscious desires for their fathers, all women must be hysterical.¹⁴ The flow-on effect of hysteria's refeminisation has been the proliferation of a whole series of psychological conditions in the late twentieth century which are almost exclusively female, a phenomenon that has been labelled "mimetic hysteria" (Mitchell 13). In a continuation of the Freudian conflation of hysteria with womanhood, the hysteric is now characterised by traits rather than symptoms. The replacement of hysteria with the "new" condition histrionic personality disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM) illustrates this change: people (almost exclusively women) with this condition exhibit traits such as excessive emotionality, seductiveness, vanity, and insecurity, all of which are associated with stereotypical, exaggerated femininity. Dissociative disorders are linked to personality characteristics like suggestibility and impressionability, qualities typically attributed to women (Barlow and Durand 409; 182). Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID, formerly Multiple Personality Disorder), eating disorders, and borderline personality disorder, all of which Mitchell regards as "aspects" of modern-day Western hysteria, occur predominantly in female patients (3). For instance, the female to male ratio for diagnoses of DID has been found to be as high as nine to one (Barlow and Durand 180). Whether or not this disproportionate rate of dissociative disorder diagnoses amongst women reflects an underlying medical reality – that is, that women are indeed more prone to these conditions and experience them in greater numbers – the close association of these disorders with stereotypical female qualities can be read as an ongoing pathologising of femininity. Although the psychiatric profession maintains that hysteria has disappeared, these quasi-hysterical disorders retain connotations that marginalise women.

Atwood includes aspects of hysteria's many reincarnations in her representation of Grace, illustrating that the condition's common denominator has always been the containment of women. Mrs Quennell interprets Grace's behaviour under hypnosis as a sign of demon possession, believing Mary's voice to be a spirit from Grace's past. However, nineteenth-century developments in psychology lead Simon to hypothesise a "neurological condition", though he cannot specify what sort of condition (470). Dr DuPont introduces the idea of double consciousness although, as Judith Knelman points out, this theory had not yet been established. Rather than dismissing authorial inconsistencies like these as simply the product of an "imaginative mind", as Knelman does, Atwood's anachronistic juxtapositions of these various interpretations can be read as an attempt to locate the entire history of hysteria at one temporal moment in order to stress its continuity (683). The implication is that the year, or even the era, in which this action takes place is of little import; in spite of their apparent differences, early Christian beliefs about possession and modern psychological and neurological theories are interchangeable in their mutual pathologising of women.

As a vehicle for female suppression, hysteria symbolises the containment of women within patriarchal society. However, hysteria, the condition of the disadvantaged, can also be an expression of power; indeed, it is "the power of the weak" (Mitchell 5). Hysterical women, as Isabella Beeton, quoted in *Alias Grace*, informs us, can be violent, incoherent, raucous and uncontrollable (157). Just as hysteria has always been used to suppress women, Atwood's condensing of the condition's history in the figure of Grace also suggests that this rebellious power has always been available to women. Ironically, although it forms part of a pathology that has been imposed on women, multiple personality subverts masculinist classification;

because the woman's identity is fragmented, unitary meaning can never be reached. Mary represents the part of women's identities that will always be inaccessible to men; in fact, her existence is so private that even Grace is not aware of it. Like a DID alter, Mary has her own identity, narrative and set of memories which the Grace personality is oblivious to. Grace suffers from several episodes of traumatic amnesia when Mary is in control. Her earliest loss of consciousness occurs after the "real" Mary Whitney's death, just after Grace has been imagining waking up beside her dead friend. Grace falls in a faint from which

no one could wake me, although they tried pinching and slapping, and cold water, and burning feathers under my nose.... [They said] that when I did wake up I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone. And when they told me that I myself was Grace, I would not believe them, but cried, and tried to run out of the house, because I said that Grace was lost, and had gone into the lake, and I needed to search for her. (208)

Not only does Grace lose awareness of her surroundings during these fits, she also has no sense of her identity; she literally loses Grace as the Mary personality takes over. Atwood suggests that Mary was responsible for the murders of Nancy and Mr Kinnear. When Grace gets up on the morning of the killings she feels detached from herself, her face in the mirror "not like my face at all" and her hand "only a husk or skin, with inside it another hand growing" (367; 368). Although she recalls what happened on either side of the murders, she does not remember the murders themselves. During these instances of dissociative unconsciousness the private Mary personality is acting without Grace's awareness; her identity is impenetrable even by the murderess herself.

Grace's inability to access her alternative personality ensures that the truth about Nancy and Kinnear's deaths remains safely locked away with Mary; given that the Grace personality has no access to Mary's narrative there is no danger of her story becoming public property. Although dissociation is used by the psychological profession to suppress and pathologise women, Atwood suggests that it can actually be a form of women's resistance. The existence of another, hidden personality creates a private narrative space, a "locked box" to which only the woman inside has the key. In an inversion of Ruskin's domestic sphere, Atwood argues that the woman in this private psychical space can get out but no one else can get in without her permission. Thus women's containment, far from being a method of suppression, is actually a means by which women protect themselves from unwanted male scrutiny. Atwood rewrites the history of hysteria from the patient's point of view, demonstrating how women subvert attempts to contain them. The continued conflation of dissociative conditions with femininity today suggests that women's utilisation of this private space will remain an important tool for retaining possession of their identities and narratives.

3. Conclusion

In her fictional re-presentation of Grace Marks, Margaret Atwood illustrates the inherently contradictory nature of the Victorian murderess whose identity combines the mythologies of the good and the bad woman. The good woman type is represented by the Grace personality. She demonstrates her virtue by resisting the direct advances of McDermott and Kinnear and the indirect probing of Simon Jordan and she is naïve to the fact that Nancy and Kinnear are involved in a sexual relationship until McDermott informs her (295-96). Grace's modesty extends even to

an aversion to bathing naked with the other female prisoners (442). Furthermore, like a good woman she is repelled by violence and cannot bring herself to kill a chicken, asking Jamie Walsh to do it for her (289). The Mary personality, in contrast, is unchaste and sinful, inviting McDermott to have sex with her by the side of the road during their flight from Kinnear's house (391). When she appears under hypnosis, Mary admits to helping McDermott strangle Nancy and expresses no remorse for her actions (468). Through her utilisation of the split personality device, Atwood suggests that it was the condition of the violent Victorian woman to be forever pulled between these mythological types; the split became so ingrained that it was internalised, forming part of the very fabric of womankind.

As a result of this split, Atwood argues, the Victorian murderess will remain an irresolvable figure. All efforts to discover her essence, whether through the practice of depth psychology or repeated re-presentation in fiction, will ultimately end in failure. As the title of Atwood's novel indicates, Victorian women had many aliases, second (and third and fourth) selves that they continually shifted between, like DID patients switching alters. From Lydia's reversion to her maiden name and Helen Maldon's re-creation as Lucy Graham to disguise their identities, to Madeleine Smith's rewriting of herself as Emile's wife Mimi L'Angelier and Grace's dissociating to Mary to perform her violent acts, Victorian women used their multiplicity to their advantage, exploiting the privacy this afforded them to rebel against patriarchal attempts at containment. Splitting women into public and private selves creates covert spaces in which they gain freedom of expression and action. The ideological private space of the domestic sphere, the literary private space of the diary, and the psychical private space of the multiple personality allow Victorian women to subvert and assault patriarchal order in secret.

Atwood's late-twentieth-century return to the Victorian murderess indicates that this splitting remains inherent in beliefs about women today. As Heidi Darroch writes, "our own era shares many of the dichotomous notions about women, sexuality, and criminality" that characterised nineteenth-century ideology (104). In particular, the Victorian debate about women's propensity for the perpetration of violence continues. The rise of second-wave feminism has ensured a substantial re-evaluation of what women are capable of doing; yet, in spite of significant developments, Kirsta maintains that at the end of the twentieth century "women's integration within today's insidious 'victim culture' is more total, their image as helpless, vulnerable – thus highly targetable – victims of crime projected with higher visibility than at any other period" since the Victorian era (4). At the same time, anxieties about women's potential for violence remain strong. "Woman" has always simultaneously signified creativity and destructiveness, an incongruity that shows no indication of disappearing today.

Re-presentations of the Victorian murderess illustrate the historical enchainment of women to their mythologies. In the twenty-first century, another rewriting of the murderess is required to expand our understanding of female violence beyond this unconsidered splitting of women into angelic victims and inhuman fiends. An expansion of the female behaviour repertoire to include violence as a normal, natural activity in the same vein as male violence, rather than as a symptom of madness or monstrosity, is perhaps the first step in this process. Until women are permitted to take responsibility for their negative actions as well as their positive ones, their agency will always be limited. Ultimately, any changes in perceptions of female violence will come from listening to the silenced voices of violent women themselves. Atwood's novel demonstrates how women can use the mythologies

designed to contain them to gain freedom, though in a limited form. Greater freedom for women surely comes from severing the ties to old mythologies, creating a new prototype on which to base representations of the murderess in the future. Perhaps it is time to stop repeating the historical murderess and write a new identity for the female killer, a rewriting process that will begin to redefine the identities of all women in twenty-first century society.

Notes

Chapter One: The Victorian Murderess: A Cultural Problem for the Twenty-First Century?

1. A 2004 report on TV violence, Towards Precautionary Risk Management of TV Violence in New Zealand (Report to the Minister of Broadcasting of the Working Group: TV Violence Project), found that during a seven-day period 8,217 incidences of violence were screened on New Zealand television, averaging eight incidences per hour of programming (39). The report notes the potential desensitisation effect which it defines as “the tendency for children who watch large amounts of violence to be less aroused when watching violent scenes”, adding that “there are indications that this can extend to violence in other situations and include reduced empathy for victims of actual violence” (11). For the full report see <http://www.tv-violence.org.nz/TV-Violence-Report.pdf>.

2. The way for these wins was, of course, paved by the nominations of both Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon for their 1991 roles as killer outlaws Thelma and Louise. For a discussion of the significance of this movie in terms of representations of female violence in film, see Schickel.

3. *Tomb Raider* won the Origins Award for Best Action Computer Game of 1997 (“Tomb Raider”). By 2002 *Tomb Raider* and *Tomb Raider 2* had sold 25 million units worldwide and each game has topped the PlayStation best-seller list; the first movie grossed \$48.2 million in its opening weekend “giving it the title of best debut ever for a film based on a video game property” (“Tomb Raider: The Ride”). An equally successful small screen phenomenon is *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), starring New Zealander Lucy Lawless as a sword-brandishing personification of women’s mythological power.

4. Numerous studies have shown that instances of violence perpetrated by men far outnumber those by women, with particular attention in recent years being paid to domestic violence. See, for example, Archer, “Sex Differences”; Dobash et al.; and Felson and Cares. For an outline of the historical connection between men and violence, see Spierenburg.

5. There are many good critical discussions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender ideology, including Poovey 1-23; Rose 13-17; Laqueur 5-11; and McKeon.

6. For a more detailed account of all these cases see Hartman. For Madeleine Smith see also Helfield; Peter Hunt; and MacGowan. For Constance Kent see also Sturrock.

7. Allen 6 and Stott 38-39 both make note of this binary in their analyses of *femmes fatales*.

8. For discussions of domestic violence before the nineteenth century, see Brundage; Clark; and Margaret Hunt.

9. The total number of prosecutions for wife murder in England and Wales rose from 72 in the decade 1851-60 to 158 in the decade 1891-00 (Wiener, *Men of Blood* 166).

10. Despite the apparent sensationalism of Lombroso and Ferrero’s text, it was indicative of the views of the wider scientific community. Lombroso, who was professor of forensic medicine at the University of Turin, was a particularly influential researcher. Lynda Hart refers to him as “the father of criminal anthropology” while Piya Pal-Lapinski writes that he “laid the cornerstones of criminal anthropology/anthropometry” and notes how “[h]is views continued to be influential well into the first half of the twentieth century” (Hart 1; Pal-Lapinski 111).

11. The sensation genre and the anxiety it produced have been comprehensively studied. See, for example, Brantlinger; Debenham; Hughes; Rance; Taylor; and Wynne. For discussions focusing specifically on gender and sensation, see Cvetkovich; Pykett; and Tromp.

12. Narratologists break narrative into two related components, “plot” and “narration”. Plot is the ordering principle of narrative, providing shape and direction (Brooks xi). Narration is not “the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting” (Genette 26).

13. For a detailed discussion of Victorian women’s diaries, see Chapter Two.

14. For representations of Lizzie Borden see Agnes DeMille’s *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death* (1968); for Florence Bravo see James Ruddick’s *Death at The Priory* (2001) and Elizabeth Jenkins’s *Dr Gully’s Story* (1972); for Adelaide Bartlett see Julian Symons’s *Sweet Adelaide* (1980); and for Madeleine Smith see Nigel Morland’s *That Nice Miss Smith* (1990). See also Caleb Carr’s *The Angel of Darkness* (1997); Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994); and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

Chapter Two: Rebellion and Conformity: Narrative Competition and Female Subjectivity in Wilkie Collins’s *Armada*

1. This is the argument made by Lonoff, who suggests that Lydia’s emotional fluctuations differentiate her from the *femme fatale* (27). O’Neill suggests that, rather than conforming to the seductive woman type, Lydia “disrupts the sexual status quo”; he is also emphatic that Lydia is not a *femme fatale*, though he does not explain why (195). For a contrasting position, see Tutor who refers to Lydia as “Collins’s ultimate *femme fatale*” (37).

2. John Sutherland observes the similarities between the two cases in his Notes to *Armada* and Catherine Peters writes how “[t]he description of the effect [Lydia] had on the public gallery and the press would have recalled the trial of Madeleine Smith” (Sutherland 704; Peters 273). For a more detailed analysis of the Madeleine Smith affair see Chapter Three pp. 65-72.

3. In 1854 Lady Tichborne released an advertisement asking for information on the whereabouts of her son who was lost at sea. Eleven years later, Australian butcher Arthur Orton claimed to be the Tichborne heir. After numerous trials, Orton went to prison for impersonation (Sutherland 696). Sutherland hypothesises that Collins is also making reference to the case of Maria Theresa Longworth-Yelverton who was deserted by her husband. Major Yelverton successfully argued that Maria was only impersonating his wife as neither of their two marriage ceremonies was legally binding (701).

4. Personal diaries were originally public, male-authored documents, having developed from the sixteenth-century record-keeping practices of businessmen and travellers. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries diaries became more introspective as Covenanters of both genders began writing journals of conscience, while diaries documenting family histories and personal memorabilia also developed from the record-keeping tradition. However, such diaries were still semi-public; they were often written to be passed down to future generations or for other family members to read and some were even circulated outside the family. It was not until the nineteenth century that diaries came to be regarded as private, female literary spaces. For further discussion of the historical significance of women’s private diaries, see Blodgett, *Centuries*; Carter; Culley; Ezell; and Simons.

5. Garthine Walker outlines the historical relationship between women and poison in her study on Early Modern England: “The Latin term for poisoning was the same as for witchcraft: *veneficium*. Both were secret, ‘most abominable’, acts against which there were few defences.... The poisoner was thus attributed with negative feminine characteristics – weak, foolish, wicked, cunning”. However, she also notes that a large number of male murderers used poison, concluding that poisoning “might be best characterised less as an *a priori* feminine method of killing and more as the mark of lethal and treacherous intimacy, the most extreme violation of domestic order” (143-45). In the nineteenth century poisoning was believed to be primarily a woman’s crime and there was considerable anxiety about female domestic poisoners going undetected because of the privacy of their actions (Hartman 5).

6. Pal-Lapinski’s in-depth analysis develops the link between poison, feminine sexuality and exoticism in *Armada*. In particular, she notes the parallel between the “indeterminacy of poison, its ability to transform itself” and Lydia’s racial and sexual hybridity. The article also provides a comprehensive overview of Victorian toxicology and the significance of poison in the nineteenth-century consciousness.

7. This sentiment is repeated in Helena Gracedieu’s diary in *The Legacy of Cain*. When Helena believes her sweetheart has abandoned her for her sister she asks, “*Can* he have deserted me? I am in such a frenzy of doubt and rage that I can hardly write that horrible question.... I feel as if I could kill them both!” (390; Collins’s emphasis).

8. Tamar Heller in *Dead Secrets* and Ann Gaylin in “The Mad-Woman Outside the Attic” argue that the struggle for narrative control between male and female characters in *The Woman in White* parallels Collins’s own authorial competition with women writers like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. For these

critics, the triumph of the male perspective illustrates Collins's need to silence the female authorial voice in order to cement his own status as a professional writer.

9. For a thorough discussion on the conflict between male and female narration in *Armadale*, see Case 125-46. Morris 108; Taylor 162-63; and Wynne 153-59 also comment on the significance of the novel's multiple narratives and Lydia's role as writer.

10. For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between women's violence and madness, and the incarceration of violent women, see Chapters Two and Three.

Chapter Three: Artificiality and Authenticity: Performing Femininity in Victorian Women's Sensational Writing

1. Behaviours and qualities that were "natural" to each gender were the subjects of intense debate in the Victorian period. As Pykett notes, "This 'natural' state of affairs was...continually in the process of construction and reproduction in legal, medical and scientific discourses, as well as in the discourse of the new social science and anthropology. Each of these areas developed definitions of woman which arose from, and authorised the claims to power of, the bourgeois male" (13).

Cvetkovich and Pykett both read *Lady Audley* as a subversion of the assumption that gender roles are natural. For a more detailed analysis of natural femininity and its relationship to acting and theatricality in the nineteenth century, see Voskuil.

2. Hartman 174-214 and Helfield 170-74 both outline the Adelaide Bartlett case in detail.

3. Biographical information about the Madeleine Smith affair is taken from MacGowan; Hartman 51-84; Helfield; and Peter Hunt.

4. Letters are adapted from their reproduction in Peter Hunt and all page references are to Hunt. I have edited the letters for clarity.

5. For biographical information about Braddon see Skilton ix-x and Tromp et al. xxii.

6. Braddon's letters to Bulwer-Lytton are reprinted in Wolff's *Sensational Victorian* and "Devoted Disciple". For references to her borrowing from French works, see especially *Sensational Victorian* 128 and "Devoted Disciple" 130; 135.

7. It could be argued that Linton's appearance did not match her reality either. In spite of the conservative gender politics in her writing, Linton was one of the first women in England to earn an independent living as a journalist. Although she married, she lived separately from her husband and continued to work as a writer. "In her own life," Susan Hamilton writes, "Linton supported equal but separate education for women, women's property rights, and women's rights to their children. But she was vehemently against women's claims for political rights" (208).

8. The debate over the morality of cosmetics dates back to the Early Modern Period; see Dolan for a discussion of cosmetics in Renaissance England.

9. Pamela Gilbert notes the close connection between Lady Audley and water: "Throughout the novel, Lady Audley is associated with the ocean, and we are informed that George first met her at the end of a pier.... It is perhaps not coincidental that she pushes him into a well, which he survives largely because there is no water in it" (221).

10. Auerbach reads the apparently more benign mermaids of Victorian fairy tales, most famously Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid", as examples of patriarchal society's containment of powerful and destructive womanhood. She writes that "[t]he social restrictions that crippled women's lives, the physical

weaknesses wished on them, were fearful attempts to exorcise a mysterious strength.”

Unable to speak or perform the act of violence required to restore her magical power,

Andersen’s mermaid clings winsomely to her dispossession, but her choice is a guide to a vital Victorian mythology whose loveable woman is a silent and self-disinherited mutilate, the fullness of whose extraordinary and dangerous being might at any moment return through violence. The taboos that encased the Victorian woman contained buried tributes to her destructive power. (8)

11. Jane Kromm’s study of madness in representation supports this claim; she notes that before the nineteenth century, madness “had been cast in male form” but as the century progressed, women began to dominate in visual representations of the insane (507). For further discussion of the nineteenth-century conflation of women with madness, see Porter’s “Chapter 6: Mad Women”; Russell 10-13; and for an analysis of the nineteenth-century French context, see Ripa. For statistics on incarceration rates by gender, see Showalter, *Female Malady* 52.

12. Since Showalter’s assertion in 1976 that “Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is *sane*”, Lady Audley’s madness (or lack thereof) has probably been the most extensively studied aspect of the novel (“Desperate Remedies” 4; Showalter’s emphasis). For some diverse readings of the role of madness in *Lady Audley* see Briganti; Gilbert; Matus; and Voskuil.

Chapter Four: Returning to the Victorian Murderess: Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*

1. Felski’s idea of a feminist public sphere, outlined in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, is based on Habermas’s model of the bourgeois public sphere. She writes:

Like the original bourgeois public sphere, the feminist public sphere constitutes a discursive space which defines itself in terms of a common identity; here it is the shared experience of gender-based oppression which provides the mediating factor intended to unite all parties beyond their specific differences.... Hence the importance that literature has assumed in the development of an oppositional women's culture; the feminist novel focuses upon areas of personal experience which women are perceived to share in common beyond their cultural, political, and class differences. The feminist public sphere exemplifies a repoliticization of culture which seeks to relate literature and art to the specific experiences and interests of an explicitly gendered community. (164-65)

2. See also Archer and Lloyd ("Chapter Five: Aggression, violence, and power" 124-59) for a reiteration of this argument about gender and violence. Today, evolutionary theory is commonly drawn on to provide evidence for men's aggression and women's non-violence. Daly and Wilson argue that men evolved to be violent because "[t]he competent use of violent skills contributes...directly to male fitness" while primordial women had no need for violence so the behaviour did not develop in them (274). Richard Wrangham's "demonic male hypothesis" extrapolates from research on apes to support the Victorian view that men are inherently wicked.

3. Walker shares this perspective in her analysis of gender and violence in the Early Modern period:

[The] interpretative model of men's violence as 'normal' and women's as numerically and thus culturally insignificant is inadequate. I am not contesting the fact that women were a minority of those prosecuted for violent crimes. I am suggesting, however, that exploring women's violence

in its own terms may prove more fruitful for the historian than simply dismissing it as an anomaly. (75)

Anthropologist Victoria Burbank agrees, noting in her cross-cultural study of gender and aggression that “the magnitude of male violence should not be allowed to obscure the fact that females, too, act aggressively. Less aggressive is not necessarily nonaggressive. To understand human aggression, an understanding of both male and female aggression is required” (71).

4. In addition to the works of Chesler, Kirsta, and Pearson, other titles include Ann Jones’s *Women Who Kill* (1991); Eileen MacDonald’s *Shoot the Women First* (1991); Lynda Hart’s *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (1994); Ann Lloyd’s *Doubly Deviant, Doubly Damned: Society’s Treatment of Violent Women* (1995); and Wendy Chan’s *Women, Murder and Justice* (2001).

5. The findings that women’s violence is increasing have been contradicted; see, for example, Pollock and Davis.

6. The anxiety caused by Bobbitt’s violence manifested itself in the proliferation of jokes, songs, urban legends and advertising campaigns based on the case. For a detailed discussion of the Bobbitt incident see Pershing; for a feminist response see Ehrenreich. In a more recent example of the fear of women’s violent revenge, pop superstar Madonna’s video for the song “What It Feels Like for a Girl” was banned from American television stations MTV and VH-1 in 2001. For a description of the video, which depicts Madonna mock-assaulting men, including shooting policemen with a water pistol, and an analysis of media reactions, see Scharff.

7. Historiographic metafiction has been most thoroughly outlined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. See her chapter entitled “Historiographic

Metafiction: The Pastime of Past Time” for further discussion of this genre as a postmodernist tool.

8. Given the widespread awareness of the tenets of psychoanalytic theory, I have not provided an outline of these concepts in my discussion. For introductions to psychoanalysis, see Elliot; Freud (*General Introduction*); and Frosh. For analyses of the relationship of women to psychoanalytic theory, see Chodorow; Craib (“Chapter 10: Psychoanalysis, Gender and Feminism” 162-75); and Saguaro.

9. For more on unitary language, see Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel”. March applies Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia to her reading of objects in *Alias Grace*, suggesting that the multitude of significations of the objects Simon shows Grace “confounds the significance both characters try to attach to [the objects], creating a distance that resists their ability to know each other” (66).

10. Stott notes how the etymological root of the word “text” is the Latin *texere*, meaning “to weave” (xi).

11. For an analysis of the historical significance of women’s needlework in literature, including a discussion of Penelope, see Macheski.

12. Similar approaches to the quilting metaphor in the novel have been taken by several other critics including Delord who likens the weaving of Grace’s tale to her piecing together a quilt pattern; Murray who notes the link in the novel between handcrafts and the representation of history; and Michael who sees the quilt metaphor as a means of representing “other” voices in a rejection of traditional linear history. Rimstead believes that the border Grace creates frames biblical discourse with feminist discourse; the Bible, like the newspapers, gives a flawed account of history because it was written by men and Grace’s sewing signifies an attempt to counterbalance this biased narrative (57).

13. For information of the history of hysteria, see Braude; Bronfen; Darroch (107-10); Micale; Mitchell; Ross; Showalter, *Hystories*; and Veith. Mitchell deals specifically with hysteria as a feminine condition. Micale devotes a section to the long-neglected subject of male hysteria (“Hysteria, Gender, Culture” 239-59). Showalter documents twentieth-century manifestations of hysteria which she calls “contemporary hysterias”, and includes a chapter on “Hysterical Men” (8; 62-77).

14. Known as the Electra complex, Freud hypothesised that during the Oedipal stage girls reject their mothers as love objects in favour of their fathers, a transference that is based on the development of penis envy. For discussions of this complex, see Craib (164); and Elliot (115-16).

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